ALFRED

MARCH 50¢

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

164 pages of ORIGINAL stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

March 1965

Dear Readers:

There are those who insist a shamrock is a trifoliolate leguminous plant but you and I know better. It's the ever-blooming emblem of the Irish. It's the "wearin' of the green", as any good Irishman will tell you, which will be pinned on uniforms of America's finest, or fastened to lapels, caps or hats, as the boys in blue proudly march up the Fifth Avenues of the U.S.A. on St. Patrick's Day.

Two such fine lads, who may be unable to participate in the day's festivities, you'll find in Max Van Derveer's novelette HIJACK. All set to capture one dangerous fugitive they fall heir, unexpectedly, to another pair of arch connivers.

After reading THE WELCOME MAT by Carl Marcus, I feel certain you will view such objects with misgivings. As for the elusive intangible called female intuition, may I point a finger of masculine appraisal at THE PHOPHECY, by Gloria Ericson. This little woman got on the wrong wavelength, and missed a costly cue.

Mystery buffs will shudder at the do-gooder in Clark Howard's story, THE TARGET, who is unpalatably carried away by altruistic purpose. Every story in this issue, in fact, offers inducement for those who enjoy a good shudder, now and then.

Alfred Hitchcock

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CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

HIJACK *by Max Van Derveer* 135

SHORT STORIES

DREAMING IS A LONELY THING *by Edward D. Hoch* 2
THE TARGET *by Clark Howard* 19
THE OPPORTUNIST *by Hal Lewis* 32
THE ZIGZAG LINE *by Don Tothe* 38
WINTERKILL *by Hazel Cheesman* 50
THE CHINA COTTAGE *by August Derleth* 55
THE WELCOME MAT *by Carl Marcus* 74
THE SEVEN-TAILED GHOST *by Margaret Norris* 82
A MAN OF CHARACTER *by Philip Ketchum* 89
FULL CIRCLE *by Carroll Mayers* 102
FIRE DRILL *by Fred S. Tobey* 109
THE "BACKWORD" SHERIFF *by Richard Hardwick* 113
THE PROPHECY *by Gloria Ericson* 122
THE INTERROGATION *by Talmage Powell* 128

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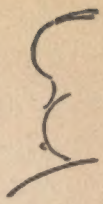
FIRE DEPARTMENT

Once possessed by dreams, and all doubts dispersed, one might find it is increasingly difficult, as time goes on, to recognize reality.



Dreaming is a LONELY THING

By Edward D. Hoch

"DAVE?" Helen queried tentatively.

He rolled over on the bed and stared up at her, surprised to see her awake so early. "What is it?"

"I had a dream, Dave. I dreamed my mother came to live with us."

"No!" He rolled back, burying his head in the pillow. "Go back to sleep and dream me up some fast cash. No dogs or cats or mothers."

"I can't help what I dream, Dave."

"You used to be good, Helen. You used to be damn good. I think you're losing your touch."

He was sorry he'd said it, because he saw at once that she was too upset to return to bed. He watched her move aimlessly about the dingy bedroom, searching for her cigarettes, then curl up in the chair by the window and stare at the dawn coming up over Hudson Street. For a moment, seeing her there with her knees up under her chin, he considered making love to her. But then the desire passed, and he closed his eyes against the brightening square of window.

He'd been with Helen Reston for two years or better, ever since they met during an all-night poker game in Kansas City. She was not the best looking girl he had ever known, and certainly not the most

intelligent, but she had one gift that was invaluable to a man like Dave Krown. She had a fantastic imagination, and she always remembered her dreams. He'd realized it the very first night they spent together, back in Kansas City, when she had awakened next to him in the morning. "I dreamed you robbed the poker game," she'd said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "Isn't that crazy?"

"Not so crazy," he'd said, thinking about it. He had been a big loser and was just about at the end of his wits. That night, he had purchased a second-hand gun, the blue steel revolver he still used, and had gone back to the game with one of Helen's nylon stockings over his face. They had left Kansas City the next morning seven hundred dollars richer.

Dave needed someone like Helen, someone to come up with ideas, even if they were the stuff of dreams. He was a man utterly without morals or fear, a man to whom brute force and the blue steel revolver under his arm had become the only religion he practiced in a world that rewarded violence with the passing fame of stark headlines and television cameras. With her ideas and his certain skill, they made a team.

The two years had passed like two months, under the sun at Miami Beach, across the continent by jet to California, then to New York, at dog tracks and horse races and poker games. Always where the action was, always where there was a sucker to be rolled or a bankroll to be hijacked. Once before, when Helen's dreams had started running to dogs and cats, he had parked them in a little motel on the Illinois state line and had gone off to hold up a gas station. The thing had been a disaster from start to finish. He'd gotten five dollars for his trouble and been forced to shoot the over-zealous attendant in the bargain. It was the only time he'd been driven to violence in his career, and he brooded about it for weeks afterward as they fled blindly across the country. He never heard if the youth lived or died, though the wound had been serious.

New York had been their last stop, where Helen dreamt of a robbery at the jewelers' exchange after three days of wandering with Dave up and down the side streets of Manhattan. He had pulled it off pretty well, and it wasn't her fault that a fluke of scheduling had made the haul next to worthless.

They'd been living up the Hudson, in the medium-sized city of Seneca, since before Christmas—conserving their money, biding

their time, and waiting for the dreams to come again. Some nights Helen worked as a waitress at a nearby lunch counter, and Dave had been doing occasional jobs of auto repair at a garage. It kept them in eating money until their luck changed.

Now, as she sat by the window, Helen asked, "Dave?"

"Huh?"

"Think we'll get to Miami this winter?"

"Not unless we can scrape up some money. The old car would never make it down there with those tires."

"I guess my dreams haven't been so good, honey." She was always aware of her failings, and conscious of the fact that he somehow held her responsible for their plight.

"That's all right." He sat up on the rumpled bed. "I've been thinking maybe we should settle down anyway. Give up this business and get a couple of honest jobs. You know, we'd probably make just as much in a year's time, without half the worry."

She came over to him. "I like to hear you say that, Dave. I like to think maybe someday I'll be dreaming about babies and a house in the suburbs instead of holdups and stuff."

"Got a cigarette?"

"Sure. Before breakfast?"

"I feel like one." She lit it for him and he inhaled deeply. "But we need one more job, Helen. One more big job so we can head south and start a new life."

"In these stories on the TV it's always the last job when the cops catch them."

"That's on TV. I know when to quit while I'm ahead. Anyway, think about it, huh? Think about it and maybe something'll come to you."

"Yeah."

They didn't work that day. Instead, they strolled through the frosty afternoon along the banks of the river, and though the Hudson was no Mississippi, it did bring back memories of their early days together. They stopped at a nearby firehouse to get new license plates for the car, and later, as the city darkened for night, he took her out for a lobster dinner at a restaurant that charged more than they could really afford.

"We'll just relax," he said later, back in the room, "and see what tomorrow brings." The money was running low, and it had been a bit of an added shock to discover that the New York State license plates on his second-hand car were due for replacement.

But he slept well, and didn't awaken until nearly dawn, when

he was aware of Helen padding about the room in her bare feet. "I had a dream," she said, seeing his open eye watching her. "I dreamed I was back home at mother's, cleaning the rug, and the vacuum cleaner turned into a snake, and then the snake turned into a lobster and it pinched my foot."

"That's no dream," he mumbled into his pillow. "That's an upset stomach. Go back to bed."

When he awoke again the sun was already high in the morning sky, and he knew it was late. Helen was stretched out on her back next to him, still asleep, half uncovered by the milky sheet. But when he turned over she awakened quickly and sat up, rubbing her eyes. "What time is it, Dave?"

"After ten."

"I had a dream."

"I know. About the lobster."

"No, another one. Just now, I think."

There was something in her voice that excited him. "Tell me about it."

She arranged herself cross-legged on the bed. "Well, remember the line at the firehouse waiting to get license plates yesterday? Remember all those guys plunking down their fifteen or twenty bucks or more for their plates?"

"Sure. What about it?'

"Dave, they have to get them by the end of this week. That firehouse is going to be taking in a lot of money the next few days." She paused for breath. "I dreamed about it. I dreamed you turned in a false alarm, and when all the firemen were gone you just walked in and held up those two foolish women who sell the license plates."

He was silent for a moment when she'd finished, silent just thinking about it. Then his face slowly relaxed into a sort of grin. "You got some imagination, Helen," he told her at last.

"You're the only gal I ever knew who could make millions while you're sleeping."

"You think it'll work, Dave?"

"Of course it'll work. And I'll see you get a new dress out of it. Or better still, a good winter coat." He'd been noticing the shabbiness of her old green one.

"When, Dave?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with growing excitement, as they always did. "When will you try it?"

"Tonight's as good as any," he told her. And he went to the closet and took the blue steel revolver from its hiding place.

At exactly ten minutes to nine, Helen telephoned a report of a fire from a booth at the nearby drug store. Dave was waiting in the shadows across from the firehouse,

watching as the massive red engines went shrilling off into the bleak winter night. When they were out of sight, leaving only the dying echo of their sirens like a scent to be followed, he walked quickly across the street, hoping there was no last-minute straggler buying his plates.

But the two women were alone, counting out the money into neat banded stacks as their day neared its end. The younger of them, a handsome brunette with deep, pale eyes, looked up as he entered. "Our last customer," she said.

He raised the wool scarf over his mouth and nose, and showed them the gun with his other hand. "I'm taking the money," he said, making it simple.

The older woman started to rise. "Oh, no!" she gasped, and then fell back onto the padded metal chair.

He took a paper bag from his overcoat pocket. "In here. All of it. Skip the silver."

The brunette held the bag open, sliding the bills in with professional ease. When she had finished, she said, "You won't get away with this."

"I'll take my chances." The bag was brimming with bills, and he wished he had brought a larger one. He backed slowly from the building, keeping the gun pointed in their general direction. "Just sit there and you won't get hurt, ladies."

Somewhere in the distance he heard the slow clanging of a bell, and he knew the first of the engines was on its way back from the false alarm. He closed the door behind him and broke into a trot, letting the woolen scarf flap away from his face.

Beneath his arm, the soft weight of the money felt good.

"Almost nine thousand dollars," Helen said as she finished counting it. "Who'd have thought there would be that much?"

"It was there, just waiting for me," he told her. "The thing went off like clockwork."

"Do we head south now, Dave? For that new life?"

"We sure do! But not for a week or so. Somebody might get suspicious if we blew town right away. Look—we cool it for about a week, then drive down to New York and trade in this car on something that will get us to Florida. After that, we're in the park." He took four twenties from the stack. "Here. Get yourself that new coat, but nothing too flashy, understand. No fur or anything."

She clutched at the bills with a grateful smile. "We still make a good team, Dave."

He was reading a newspaper ac-

count of the robbery when she returned the following evening with the new coat, a fuzzy red thing with black speckles that matched her hair. "That's not supposed to be flashy?" he asked with a laugh.

"It didn't cost much, honey. Only seventy dollars. You like it?"

"I like it."

"Dave, why did I buy a new winter coat if we're goin' to Florida next week?"

"You need one, don't you? Maybe we won't be spending our lives down there."

"You're not going to give it up, are you?"

He sighed and reached for a cigarette. "This one went so smooth, doll."

"Don't call me that."

"All right. But be sensible, Helen. You don't quit when you're ahead."

"No! You wait till you're lying with your face in the gutter and some cop's bullets in your back! Then you'll decide to quit!"

"All right, calm down." He slipped into his fleece-lined jacket. "I'm going out for a walk."

"So they can find you easier?"

"We agreed to stay here a week, didn't we? So how is it going to seem if I never show up at the garage? I'll just look in on them, and I'll be back in an hour or so. Here." He gave her another twenty. "Think nice thoughts while I'm gone."

"Sure. I'll have myself a dream

or two about a castle in Spain."

Outside, a January wind had come up, cutting through Dave's jacket like a knife and driving him quickly to the shelter of a nearby bar. He ordered a beer, although he could have afforded whiskey, and carried it, foaming, to a damp cigarette-scarred table because he didn't like to stand at bars.

He had been sitting alone for only a moment when a vaguely familiar woman with dark hair and pale eyes entered the place, and headed unhesitatingly for his table. "You're Dave Krown, aren't you?" she asked in a low voice he barely heard.

"I guess I am. You look familiar."

"May I sit down?"

"Sure." He half rose to pull out the opposite chair for her. But the first beginnings of something like fear were building within his stomach.

"I'm surprised you don't remember me. You robbed me of nine thousand dollars just last night."

He kept his hand steady on the beer, hoping his face didn't reflect the sudden emotion that shot through him. "I guess you must have the wrong guy. I don't know what you mean."

She glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot. "Look, you can drop the act. I'm not going to yell for the police—not right now, anyway. I recognized you, even with the scarf over your face. I remember faces, and I remembered yours. I remembered you had been in for your plate the night before, and I remembered you had an odd name. I looked through the forms I had turned in, and I found yours. Dave Krown, with address. I was waiting outside, wondering what to do next, when I saw you come in here."

She had fixed him with the intenseness of her deep pale eyes, and the fascination of it was enough to keep him from running. She was serious, and she had no intention of calling the police. Maybe she was just a girl out after kicks. Well, he'd see that she got them. "What's your name?" he asked suddenly.

"Susan Brogare," she answered.

"What do you want?"

"Just to know you, to know what kind of a man you are."

"Come on," Dave said, suddenly deciding on a course of action. He led her through the beaded curtains at the rear of the room, into a dim dining area of high-partitioned booths. In one booth a couple was kissing, leaving their beer untouched.

"Why back here?" she asked.

"It's better for talking." He slid into the booth opposite her.

"You're not afraid of me, are you?"

The pale eyes blinked. "You probably should know that I've left a very detailed letter with a friend at the office. In it I give your name, address, and description, as well as the license number and description of your car. I identify you as the holdup man, and I say that I'm going to confront you with the fact. I end up by saying that you'll be responsible for my death if I'm killed." She paused for breath and then hurried on. "That letter goes to the police if I die or disappear for more than a day."

"Are you some kind of a nut or something?" he asked, baffled now by this strange woman. "Look, lady, if . . ."

"I said my name was Susan."

"Look, Susan, if you think I'm some sort of criminal, you should call the police. If not, just let me alone." He didn't know if the part about the letter was true or not, but the cool brazenness of her approach made him willing to bet that it was.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you. Would you buy me a drink?"

"Sure. Beer?"

She shook her head slightly. "Vodka martini."

While he was getting the drinks he considered the obvious solution —leave her sitting there, and be ten miles away with Helen before she caught on. But that was just the point. He wouldn't be more than ten miles away before she had the police on his tail. He could lure her to the apartment and tie her up (or kill her?) but there still was the problem of the letter. Dave was not a man to spend the rest of his life hiding in alleys.

So he carried the drinks back to the booth as if the whole thing were the most natural situation in the world. Just a girl and a guy on a date. "Are you married?" he asked, because another thought had just crossed his mind. He'd read about women like that.

"I was. For a bit over a year. My husband was killed in a plane crash." She played with her drink. "I know what you're thinking—maybe I'm lonely. And I guess maybe I am. You're the most exciting thing that's happened to me in two years."

By the dim indirect lighting of the back room, she might have been on either side of thirty. He guessed the far side, closer to his own age. She was about the same size and coloring as Helen, but there was a world of difference between them. "Isn't it usually exciting on your job?" he asked, just making conversation while he continued to size her up.

"At the Motor Vehicle Bureau?

Are you kidding? A job's a job."

"So now that you've met me, you're looking for more excitement. Is that it?"

"I told you, I just wanted to see what sort of man you were. I've known lots of people, but never an armed robber. And the way you went about it was quite experienced. The police are properly baffled."

"Thanks. But I'm still not admitting anything." He had read somewhere about miniature tape recorders hidden in women's purses.

"Are you going to run away now?"

"Maybe."

"Alone, or with a girl?"

"There's a girl," he admitted, thinking this might discourage her seeming advances.

"Do you love her?"

"How do I answer that? I've lived with her for two years now."

"I suppose she's waiting across the street."

"Yes."

Presently they ordered another drink, and the talk drifted almost imperceptibly to their past lives. He found himself (fantastically) listening to her account of college days with all the interest of a fellow on a first date, and it was only with an effort that he managed to pull himself back to the fuzzy reality of the situation.

It was almost midnight when he returned to the apartment, and he did not mention the encounter to Helen, though his exact reasons for not doing so were unclear even to himself. She was already in bed, not yet asleep, and as he entered she said, "I called the garage. You weren't there."

"I stopped for a drink and got talking to a guy."

Helen seemed to accept the explanation. She rolled over on her wrinkled pillow and said, "I was afraid the police had picked you up."

"Not a chance."

"We've got to get out of it, Dave. I can't take the worrying any more. I think that's why the dreams are coming harder."

"That last one was a beauty. Come up with a few more like that one."

"What about Florida, Dave?"

"I'm remembering."

"I hope you are."

The following night he met Susan Brogare again in the dim room behind the bar. This time they left quite early and drove out along the river in her car, because he feared that Helen might discover them at the bar.

"You're a strange woman," he told Susan once, while they parked by the river watching fat white

snowflakes drift aimlessly down from the darkened sky.

"I just want to get something out of life, that's all."

"By blackmailing me into making love to you?"

"I'm not blackmailing you. You're free to leave any time you want."

"But you know I won't," he said quietly, wondering in that moment where it was all going to end.

They never spoke of the holdup after that first night; not directly, though it often intruded onto the fringes of their thought and conversation. He learned more about this strange girl with the pale eyes than he had ever known about Helen, and found himself at the same time telling her things he had never spoken of to another person.

By the end of their third night together, he knew he was going to leave Helen.

"Do you know what today is?" Helen asked him in bed the next morning.

"Sunday, isn't it?"

"But it's Groundhog Day too! And the sun is shining. What does that mean?"

He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but it was useless. "All right," he said finally, "I'm awake. And the sun is shining."

"Dave?"

"What now?"

"When are we going to Florida?"

He was silent for a long time as he puttered about the bedroom in his bare feet and pajamas. Finally he said, "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Helen."

"About what?"

"Florida and all. I've been thinking maybe it's time we split up. You know, went our own ways for a while." He saw the expression on her face and hurried on. "I'd give you your cut from the job, of course. I'd even give you an extra thousand just to get settled."

Her face was frozen into a pale mask. "Two years, Dave? Is this all I get after two years?"

"Just for a while, that's all. Maybe we could get together again in six months or so."

"You'd leave me, just like that?"

"Don't make it sound like something—dirty. We've had two good years together."

"Where do you think you'd be without me, Dave? Without my dreams?"

"Maybe I've got to find out. At least you've got those dreams. They're always with you."

She looked away suddenly. "Dreaming is a pretty lonely thing when there's nobody to tell them to."

"You'll find somebody."

"No I won't." She seemed suddenly decided. "Dave, I won't let you leave me like this. I won't let you."

He fumbled for a pack of cigarettes and wondered why the thing was suddenly being so difficult. For two years of wanderings, she had been nothing but a woman, a paid companion who ate with him and slept with him and remembered her dreams. He had always been the boss of the situation, always knowing in the back of his mind that the day of their parting would sometime come. He had needed her, but only because there was no one else for him to need.

"What will you do about it?" he asked, suddenly angered at her resistance.

"I think I'd turn you in to the police before I'd let you go. Dave. I really mean it."

And he could see by her eyes that she did.

The next two nights were difficult ones for Dave. He was still meeting Susan Brogare secretly, but there was a feeling about the thing that made him think of a water-soaked log being pulled slowly into the vortex of a whirlpool. He knew now that this girl —this woman—would accompany him anywhere, to Florida or the moon. And he knew, just as certainly, that Helen Reston would not simply pack up and leave. He was involved, deeply involved, with two women, and both of them had the knowledge to destroy him.

But he'd known, almost from their first meeting, that the strangeness of Susan would attract and entrap him. She was fascinating and mysterious, with a sense of reckless adventure that matched his own. And it was to Susan that he brought his problem on that fifth night. "I can't shake her," he said. "She's threatening to tell the police."

But the dark-haired girl only looked at him through half-closed eyes, and blew smoke from her nose like some dragon of old. "You ought to be able to think of something," she said quietly, and he wondered what she might have been implying. Neither of them dared to put the thought into words, but that night in bed, Dave Krown dreamed about the service station attendant he had shot back in Illinois.

The next day Helen was calmed down a bit, and, for the first time, made no mention of their long-delayed journey to Florida. She left for work early, and he didn't see her the rest of the day. He began to feel good, so good that

he even ventured a stroll past the firehouse for the first time since the holdup. An unusual February warmth was in the air, and a few of the firemen sat outside talking and waiting, as firemen do. Dave nodded to them as he went by.

And later that night, in his car, he told Susan, "She's better today."

"Do you think she'll let you go?"

"Well . . . no."

"Then something has to be done."

"We could just leave."

"And have her tell the police?"

"She would be implicating herself if she did," he argued, but he knew deep within himself that such a possibility would not deter Helen. In the two years they'd traveled together, he'd come to know the streak of unreasoning vengeance that slept just beneath the surface of her personality. She was not always the simple, stupid girl she seemed.

Susan stubbed out her cigarette. "I want you, Dave. All my life I've had the things I really wanted taken away from me. I knew I wanted you from that first moment in the firehouse, and I'm not going to lose you."

"You won't," he said. "I'll think of something."

Helen was quiet that night, preoccupied. And the following day was much the same. She puttered about the apartment for a time, and once asked him if he had decided what to do. He replied that they would be moving on soon, and left it at that. But he found himself watching her when her back was turned, watching and nurturing the growing hatred within him.

"Dave," she said to him suddenly, "I'm tired of sitting around this apartment alone every night. I want you to take me out to dinner."

"Dinner? When?"

"Tomorrow night. And at some nice place out in the country. The Willow Grove, maybe."

"I don't even know if they're open in the winter."

"They're open."

"O.K. We'll see."

He told Susan that night, explaining his commitment for the following evening. They were at a little neighborhood bar on the far side of town, a place she had introduced him to a few nights before. She was impatient, constantly lighting cigarettes and stubbing them out only half-smoked.

"You've got to do something, Dave. I can't stand this town any longer."

"Just be patient, will you? We've hardly known each other a week."

"I've known you for a lifetime,"

she said, and lit another cigarette.

After a time a thought crossed his mind, and he asked her, "Did you ever destroy that letter? The one you left in the office?" It was the first time he had referred to it since she'd told him about it.

"I'll bring it along when we leave this town," she told him. "Don't worry."

"I'm not."

She rested her hand on his. "Dave—if it has to be done, please do it. For me."

He knew what she meant, and somehow the cold calculation of her voice did not surprise him. He was in so deep already that nothing surprised him any longer.

When he awakened in the morning, one sandy eyeball pressed against the wrinkled white of the sheet, he saw that Helen was already up. She was standing at the window smoking a cigarette, and he could see at once that she was upset.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"I had a dream, Dave. A terrible dream!"

He propped himself up on an elbow, looked around for his cigarettes, and then decided he didn't need one. "Tell me about it."

"I don't know how to—it was so awful! We were—we were at a bar someplace. Up in the mountains, I think. Just the two of us. After a while I went to the ladies' room, and when I came out you were gone, just gone! You had left me there, all by myself! I was frantic and I ran outside. A car came from somewhere and hit me. That's when I woke up, just as the car hit me."

"Crazy dream," he said.

"It was awful."

"Well, forget about it now."

She had put down the cigarette and was twisting her hands together. "Dave—"

"What?"

"Dave, it was you driving the car."

"Helen, pull yourself together. It was only a dream."

He showered, shaved, and dressed in silence, trying to keep his hands from shaking, trying not to think about the black shape forming, growing, in his mind. It was a full hour before he could bring himself to ask her about their plans for the evening. "Still want to go out to dinner?"

"Of course. I'm counting on it."

"Good," he said. "I think it will help us both."

Neither of them mentioned the dream again. There was no need.

The Willow Grove was, in the off-season, a dark and almost deserted place that stood by itself next to a seldom-traveled country

road. The willows, that had given the place its name in some far distant past, were almost gone now, felled by blight and age and an ever-expanding parking lot. Dave imagined that the summer customers on a Saturday night would crowd the walls to bursting, but in February there were only a few tables of scattered diners, and a dimness of illumination that unintentionally directed the eye to the glowing cigarette machine that was the brightest single spot in view.

Dave had parked far back in the nearly deserted lot, and inside he led Helen to a table a bit out of the way. They chatted through dinner with a rapport that was almost like the old days, though he was not completely unaware of the occasional strain between them.

"The food is always good here," he said once, when the conversation threatened to lag.

"We've only been here once before."

"Still, it's good. Want another drink?"

"I guess not. What time is it?"

"A little before nine. Why? Got a late date?" He said it with a chuckle, but she did seem edgy about something. She had kept her coat over her shoulders, the new red one with the black speckles that matched her hair, but he thought still that he detected a shiver. "Are you getting a cold?"

"I don't think so, honey. I'm just nervous, I guess. I'd like to get out of here, head south."

"Then you couldn't wear the coat."

"No kidding, Dave, when are we going?"

"I don't know."

"Are you still thinking of leaving me?"

"Let's talk about it on the way home," he said, postponing the conversation.

Coffee came, and an after-dinner drink. Finally, Helen excused herself while he motioned for the check. He watched her go off in the direction of the ladies' room, and sat for some moments wondering whether he could really go through with it. Then, almost reluctantly, he rose from the table and started for the door. It was just five minutes after nine, by the clock in the checkroom.

Outside, his breath white against the night air, he climbed behind the wheel of the car and started the motor. He turned the car a bit, into position, aiming it down the driveway like a torpedo.

He waited, the motor purring, ready for a touch of his foot on the pedal. Waited for Helen to come running out.

As in the dream.

But then perhaps all of life was but a dream, and Dave Krown, sitting in the dark, was only a vision conjured up by nightmare. Perhaps all this would pass, as it had the night he'd shot the man in the gas station, halfway across the country.

Had he ever died, finally? Don't we all die, finally?

Helen, Helen . . . forgive me.

And there she was, running out of the doorway, her new red coat bundled against the cold, black hair barely visible over the fuzzy collar. His foot went down and the car shot ahead.

Forgive me, Helen.

He closed his eyes at the last instant, feeling, rather than seeing, the thud and crunch of metal against flesh.

"It was an accident," he kept saying over and over. "I didn't see her. It was an accident!"

Someone had covered the body with a tablecloth from inside, and far in the distance he could hear the beginnings of an approaching siren. One of the bartenders stepped forward through the sparse crowd of onlookers. "He's right. I saw the whole thing through the window. This dame came tearing out and ran right out in front of him. He couldn't have stopped for her."

One or two others mumbled in agreement, and Dave began to relax for the first time. He still averted his eyes from the sprawled, broken body, though, even after the first police car pulled into the parking lot.

"She dead?" the officer asked, reaching for the clipboard he kept on the dash.

"She's dead."

"Anybody here know her?" he asked, his voice reflecting the professional's only half-concealed boredom with death.

"I knew her," Dave started to reply. "Her name was Helen . . ."

He stopped, the words frozen in his throat like a lump of suddenly congealed sweat. There in the doorway, not twenty feet away, stood Helen Reston. There was a slight smile playing about her lips, and of course she wasn't wearing her coat.

"This the woman you know?" the officer asked, lifting the tablecloth and turning the head for a better view in the sparse lighting of the parking lot.

Dave didn't answer. He knew without looking that the dead woman at his feet had become, fantastically, not Helen, but his Susan.

"Driver's license in her purse says her name is Susan Brogare. Looks like she worked at the Motor Vehicle Bureau. She the one

you knew?" the officer queried.

"I knew her," Dave answered mechanically.

"Well, you'll have to come along with me for questioning. Just routine, you know."

He nodded, then asked, "Can I speak to a friend over there for a moment?"

"Sure. I got all the time in the world."

Dave pushed his way through the people and walked over to Helen in the doorway. "What did you do? God help us, what did you do?"

The smile, if it was a smile, still played about her lips. "I called her, told her I had to see her. I said I knew all about you two and had reached a decision. She met me in the ladies' room at nine o'clock. I told her she could have you, told her you were waiting in the parking lot to take her away. I even gave her the coat, because I said you wanted her to have it. She ran out there to meet you."

"But—but you knew I'd be waiting to—"

"I knew, Dave."

"There never was a dream, was there? You made it all up. You knew just what I would do."

"I've always known what you would do, Dave. And there have never been any dreams, not really."

"No dreams," he repeated, not understanding. Understanding only that this woman before him had depths of which he had never dreamed—depths of wisdom, and hate.

"You'll get off," she said. "It was an accident."

"Sure." But he was remembering the letter, the damning letter, Susan had written on that day so long ago, a week ago. The letter that would send him to the electric chair.

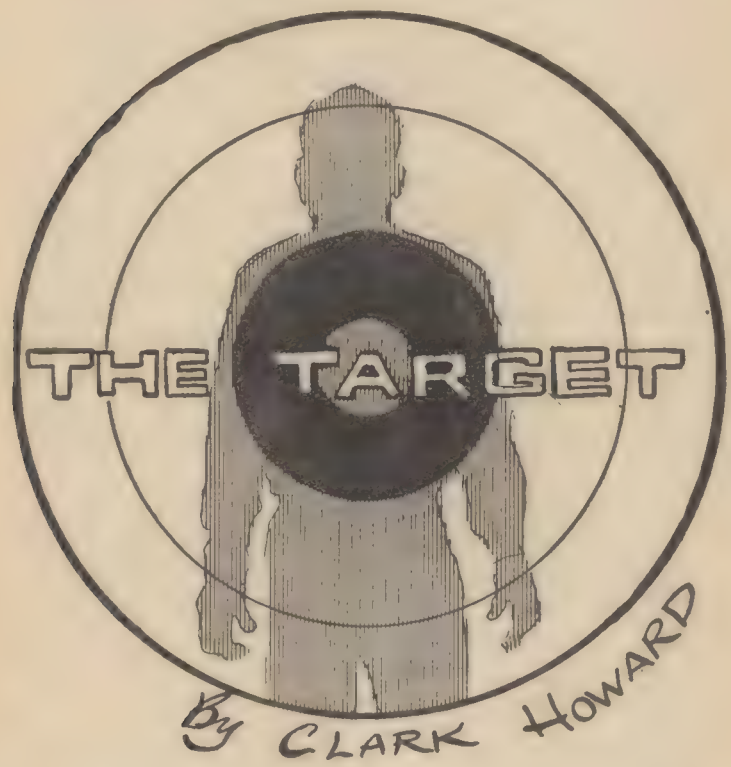
"I couldn't let you go, Dave. I couldn't."

"How did you know about her?"

"I said I didn't dream, Dave. I never have. But you talk in your sleep. You've talked in your sleep every night for two years."

Behind him, like a voice from a dream, the police officer said, "Come on, mister. We'd better get going."

The lasting sense of filial duty having been proclaimed these many years, one could be properly shocked should he encounter contradiction.



Joe Colucci opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. Wednesday, he thought. Wednesday, and Vince was coming to see him today. Vince would help him, he was certain of it.

He sat up, swinging his legs off the side of the cot. The little clock next to his bed read seven-fifteen. Vince would be there at ten; he had plenty of time. Slipping his feet into house shoes he stood up

and walked across the room to the window. Looking out through the bars he saw it was drizzling rain. He cursed briefly. You'd at least think the sun would be shining; the weather should be pleasant when a man was about to see his only son again for the first time in eight years.

Had it been that long, really? Colucci's face curled in a thoughtful frown. Vince was thirty-four now. Thirty-four years old; and a doctor. Dr. Vincent Colucci. Only he didn't use the family name anymore. He called himself Dr. Vincent Collins. My name isn't good enough for him. Not anymore, not since he's a big shot doctor and gets his pictures in fancy medical journals. Ah, well—

How the years passed, Colucci thought almost in wonder. Why, in another two years he himself would be sixty. Sixty! A lot of water under the bridge.

He turned from the window and went into a small lavatory cut into one corner of the room. Stripping off his pajama top he washed and lathered his face and began to shave. He didn't look nearly sixty, he decided. Fifty maybe, because of the grey hair, but not sixty. If it weren't for the grey hair he might be able to get by with forty-five, if he had a reason.

When he had finished in the lavatory Colucci returned to his bed and opened a narrow metal locker next to it. He took fresh underwear from the shelf, and slacks and a white shirt from a hanger. He dressed, then sat down on the cot and put on clean sox and changed the houseslippers for a pair of loose loafers. Seeing that it was still five minutes before eight o'clock, he set about making his bed.

At eight the outer wooden door and inner barred door to the room were opened and one of Colucci's three permanent guards came in. It was Robar, the swing shift guard whom Colucci disliked the most. He was carrying Colucci's breakfast tray and had the morning newspaper tucked under one arm. He put the tray on a small table near the wall and walked over to where Colucci sat. Unfolding the paper, he dropped it on the cot so Colucci could see it.

"Well, you're still worth a million bucks today," the guard said casually. Colucci glared at him for a moment, then snatched up the paper and began reading it.

SYNDICATE CRACKDOWN CONTINUES, the headline read; its sub-head said: INFORMER COLUCCI, MILLION DOLLAR TARGET, REPORTED STILL ALIVE.

The story that followed was

much the same in content as previous news stories carried throughout the past week. Joseph Colucci, a high executive in the crime syndicate, was still alive now seven days after his life had been put on the underworld trading block with a bounty of one million dollars. Colucci, brought to trial three months earlier by the government, had been convicted of engineering the kidnap-killing of a federal agent who had infiltrated the underworld ranks. Facing execution, Colucci had agreed to testify before a crime committee in exchange for a commutation to life in prison, with the provision that he always be kept separate from the rest of the inmate population to protect his life. His testimony, which lasted four full days, had split the seams of the crime syndicate wide open; at last count some sixty-five of its gangster members had been arrested by federal officers.

Following his performance, Colucci was removed to special guarded quarters in an isolated wing of a federal jail hospital. Twenty-four hours later a startling thing happened; newspapers in every major city in the country received simultaneous anonymous telephone calls announcing that a price of one million dollars had been put on Colucci's head for any hired gun —or anyone else—who could manage to assassinate the gangland traitor. The fact that so many newspapers in so many cities had been phoned at exactly the same time was considered undeniable evidence that the price was a legitimate offer being participated in by the widespread underworld network. The syndicate had taken clever advantage of the newspapers' policy of printing anything sensational; they had used it to run a front page want ad for a killer.

Colucci had known, of course, that his testimony would make him a marked man; that an automatic price would be put on his head for the temptation of every syndicate torpedo in the country; but he had not dreamed the boys would go to such extremes with their vendetta. A million dollars! That made him the target of *everyone;* not just the hoods, the professional triggermen, but every hustler, every punk.

Even, Colucci thought now, for the thousandth time in the past week, even his guards.

"A million dollars is a lot of money to pay for a punk," Robar said, looking over Colucci's shoulder. Colucci tossed the paper aside.

"I wasn't a punk," he said tightly. "I was a big man."

"*Was* isn't *is,*" the guard reminded him. "You're a punk now."

Colucci ignored the remark and

stretched out on his cot to wait until ten o'clock when his son, Vince, would arrive to visit him.

"Aren't you going to eat your breakfast, Joe?" Robar asked.

"You know I'm not," Colucci said coldly, "so why ask?"

Robar laughed. "Just because I won't take a bite of everything first to show you it isn't poisoned? Just because of that, you're going to pass up a good hot breakfast?"

"That's right, screw," Colucci said. He had not eaten breakfast in a week, since the day the bounty was announced. And if it were not for Landman, the day guard who came on at nine o'clock, he would not be eating lunch or supper either; but Landman liked to keep his shift running smoothly so he humored Joe by sampling every dish to prove it was untainted.

"Well," Robar grinned gleefully, "if that's the way you want it, Joe." He picked up the tray of food and started to leave. At the door he stopped and looked back at Colucci. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "with a million bucks a man could drop out of sight and never be found. He could live like you used to live, Joe, like a real big shot. Couldn't he?"

Colucci did not answer. Robar smiled coldly and went out, muttering to himself.

Joe Colucci's agreement included a stipulation whereby he was permitted to receive visitors whose identity did not have to be made known to jail officials. As long as Colucci personally approved the visitor, he was to be admitted. This infraction of normal prison security was not as revolutionary as it might sound, for two reasons: first, Colucci was kept separate from the other inmates, so the visitor did not have to enter the prison proper to see him; and second, it was a well known fact that Colucci was safer in jail than anywhere else, therefore was not an escape risk.

Vincent Colucci arrived incognito at the jail at the appointed time. He identified himself simply as Mr. Vincent and was brought under guard to Joe's private quarters. Joe looked at him through the peephole in the door and gave the guards permission to let him in.

"How've you been, Vince?" Colucci asked when they were alone. There was no embrace, no joy in the reunion, not even a handshake; the years had left a wide gap between them.

"I've been fine," Vince said. "How are you?"

Joe waved one hand around the room in a peremptory gesture that took in the drab metal furnishings, the aged-yellow walls, the

barred windows. "Alive," he said tonelessly, "that's about all."

Vince nodded silent understanding. He was a tall, clean-cut man with his father's thick hair and even white teeth. His fair complexion he had inherited from his mother, now long dead.

Joe Colucci looked closely at his son whom he had not seen for eight years. "You look like you need a rest," he said. "Your eyes are tired."

"I suppose I do," Vince admitted.

"You still knocking yourself out to get that place built? You know, that home for crippled kids or whatever?"

"It's a research hospital," Vince corrected. "Yes, I'm still at it."

"I seen your picture in the paper about a year ago when you gave a talk about it."

Vince nodded. "That was a fund-raising speech. We were trying to get enough money together to buy the land for the hospital."

"Did you get it?"

"No. We got enough for a down payment though. The rest we're paying a little at a time."

"When do you think you'll finally build the place?"

"Ten years or so, we figure."

Colucci grunted. "Long time," he remarked.

A silence fell between the two men then, heavy and uncomfortable. Joe walked over and sat down on his cot. Vince drew a chair out from its table and turned it to face his father. He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to Joe.

"No, thanks," Joe said, "I got ulcers, can't smoke on an empty stomach." He explained to Vince why he no longer partook of breakfast. "That's why I wanted to see you, kid; I need help."

Vince's face hardened a little. "I don't want to get involved with you," he said levelly.

Joe grunted again. "You're already involved, Vince; I'm your father, remember?"

"As far as I'm concerned," Vince said coldly, "that's a biological fact, nothing more."

"Now wait a minute, I did a lot for you, Vince—"

"All you ever did for me was drive my mother to an early grave and put a stigma on me that I had to change my name to get rid of!" Vince suddenly stormed.

"What about your education?" Colucci asked calmly, unmoved by the outburst. "What about the eight years it took you to learn how to be a big shot doctor?"

"That was conscience money you paid to Ma," Vince told him knowingly, "so you could sleep nights."

"Great," Joe said emotionally, throwing up his hands in dramatic surrender, "swell, wonderful. Okay, I never did anything for you; not a thing. I'm a no-good gangster and you're the salt of the earth, all right?" He jabbed a finger in the air toward Vince. "But I'm still your blood father and you're still my blood son," he said slowly and emphatically, "and I don't believe you're gonna sit there and let me get killed without even trying to help."

"There's no way I can help you," Vince said, his voice softening. "There's no way anyone can help you."

"There is a way," Joe said urgently, "believe me, there's a way!"

Vince got up and walked over to the window. Beyond the horizontal bars he could see the rain-swept, grey-walled jail courtyard looking like some forlorn, deserted place out of another world. And it was another world, he supposed, in a way; a world far removed from his own, from his wife and children, his medical practice, the research foundation hospital that would take forever to complete.

Vince sighed and turned back to his father. "How?" he asked simply.

Colucci sat forward on the very edge of the cot, tense. "Go see Martino for me—" he began.

"Nick Martino?" Vince almost whispered, as if to say the gang lord's name aloud might summon instant reprisal.

"That's right," Joe said, "the big boy. He's completely in the clear; I didn't say nothing to that committee that could hurt him in any way. But I could have, see? I could have nailed him to the cross with railroad spikes, but I didn't, I held back." Joe grinned cunningly. "I held back so I'd have an ace in the hole in case I needed one. Well, now I need one."

Vince nodded perceptively. Still the same old Joe Colucci, he thought, still with the same animal nature that had brought him from driving a bootleg liquor truck thirty years ago to his recent high lieutenancy in the organized army of gangsterism. Still the plotter, the conniver, the big fixer. Only now he did his fixing from a bare jail room instead of a penthouse. Nearly sixty years old, Vince thought, and he ends up with nothing; no friends, no real family, nothing. Just ulcers and a long-shot chance of living his few remaining years in a drab room with barred windows.

"What would I have to tell Martino?" Vince asked resignedly.

"You wouldn't have to tell him nothing," Joe said. "Just take him a letter in a sealed envelope. You

won't even know what the letter says, so you'll be protected that way. But I'll tell you this much, it will contain certain information that Nick doesn't even know I know; stuff I got from that federal man who worked his way into the organization; stuff that can put Big Nick right in the death house. But you're not gonna know what it is. All you got to do is deliver the letter. Just give Nick my regards—and tell him if the bounty isn't taken off me in twenty-four hours I'll write the same letter to the feds. I want it taken off the same way it was put on, too—in the headlines, so I'll be sure." Joe wet his lips nervously and seemed to sit more tensely on the edge of the cot. "Will you do it for me, Vinny?"

Vince felt a soft pull at his heart. It was the first time Joe had called him Vinny in twenty-five years or more, since he was just a little kid; back before his mother packed up and took him and moved to another city and gave him another name in another world. Twenty-five years or more. And still it pulled softly at his heart to hear it.

But then Vince remembered who it was he was dealing with; he remembered that this was Joe Colucci, gangster, public enemy, killer of men. The soft tug went away as the ache of bitter memories returned. His anguish swelled.

"All right, I'll do it," Vince said around the ache.

Landman, the day guard, brought Colucci his lunch tray an hour after Vince had left. He put the tray on the table and paused for a moment to look out at the rain.

"Lousy weather today, Joe," he said idly.

"Yeah, lousy." Colucci was lying on the cot, hungry from his self-imposed morning fast, but on the whole feeling much better, much less nervous than he had all week. Now that Vince was on his way to see Martino, everything, he was sure, was going to be all right. He got up and put on his house slippers and went over to the little table where his lunch waited.

"Come on," he said to Landman. "I'm hungry."

The day guard sat down across from him. There were two forks on the tray; one for Colucci and one for Landman to sample the food. Colucci waited for Landman to begin his ritual of taking a bite from each dish, but the guard merely sat back with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"This rain," he said, "reminds me that I've got a leak in my roof at home. Right over the kitchen stove, of all places. Been meaning

to have it fixed for quite a while now, but can't seem to be able to work it into the old budget."

Colucci pushed the tray a little closer to Landman. "Come on—" he said impatiently, "the meal's getting cold." Still Landman did not touch the fork.

"You know, Joe," the guard went on, "a guy like me don't earn as much money as some people might think. Do you know that guards earn less than common laborers? That's a fact. I tell you, it's a problem sometimes just making ends meet."

Colucci's eyes narrowed in slow understanding. "If you're trying to shake me down, Landman," he said flatly, "forget it. I haven't got a dime."

"If it wasn't for me, Joe," the guard said pointedly, "you wouldn't even be able to eat two meals a day. I'm the only one who will watch the cooks get your food ready, and I'm the only one who samples it for you to prove that it isn't spiked. That's not part of my job, you know; I can quit doing it anytime I get ready."

"Look," Colucci repeated evenly, "I just told you, I don't have a dime."

"Don't con me, Joe," Landman said. "A smart boy like you, I'll bet you've got plenty stashed—"

Colucci glared coldly at the day guard. Dirty low-life screw, he thought bitterly. Take the food right out of a man's mouth. All right, screw, we'll just play it your way. I can go without eating until Vince fixes it up for Big Nick to take the price off me. After that, when I'm not worth a million bucks anymore, I won't have to worry about people poisoning me.

Colucci got up from the table without a word and returned to lie on his cot. Landman grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yourself, Joe," he said easily, picking up the still full tray. "We'll see how you feel at supper."

Colucci refused to eat supper that evening. Landman went off duty at six and Thorn, the night guard, came on. Thorn was the youngest of the trio, a new guard who had worked at the jail for only a few months. He often came to chat with Colucci before lights out.

"I hear you're on a hunger strike," he said to Colucci that night. Colucci nodded without answering. "It's too bad I'm not on duty at any of the mealtimes," Thorn went on speculatively. "The officer's commissary is closed this late too, else I'd go get you something. Guess you're pretty hungry by now, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty hungry," Colucci said flatly, wishing the young

guard would stop all the talk.

"I get a relief break at ten," Thorn said. "There's a little cafe about a mile away that stays open until midnight. I could bring you sandwiches and pie every night if you wanted. Only thing is, it would take me too long going by bus. 'Course, if I had a car—"

Colucci sneered up from his cot at the baby-faced night guard. "Forget it, punk," he said levelly. "I wouldn't even buy you a bicycle."

Thorn shrugged in wide-eyed innocence. "Up to you, Joe," he said. He went over to the door to lock Colucci in for the night. "Have a nice sleep."

Colucci muttered a curse under his breath. They really had him good, those lousy punks. All three of them, Landman on days, Thorn on nights, and that rotten Robar on the swing shift. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He couldn't even complain to the federal men because there was actually nothing to complain about; Landman and Robar weren't holding back his food, they were simply refusing to guarantee it hadn't been poisoned by one of the cons in the kitchen. And Thorn, that bug-eyed little thief, hadn't actually asked for a bribe; he'd only suggested that he could use a car. Pretty smart boys they were.

Colucci closed his eyes and tried to figure out how long it would be until his son got back. Vince was probably in New York at that very moment. Of course, seeing Big Nick would take some doing. You don't just walk in on the head of a national crime syndicate; there were phone calls to be made, arrangements to be agreed upon, a meet set. But say Vince got to see him sometime tomorrow, he would be back before noon the next day, at the latest. That was—let's see—thirty-nine hours. And how long since he ate last? Not since supper the previous evening; that was twenty-eight hours ago. That made a total of sixty-seven hours he would have to go without eating. Nearly three days and three nights. Your ulcers aren't going to like that, Joe, he told himself. And you won't be able to smoke either, don't forget.

But I'll make it, Colucci silently vowed. I'll make it.

The entire next day was agony.

When Colucci awoke, an hour earlier than usual, his stomach was already growling. Hunger had tightened his nerve ends until they were raw, and the bile inside him felt as if it was rising right up into his esophagus.

He got shakily out of bed and rinsed his mouth, being careful to swallow only a little water to

keep his glands moist. Any more than that would only make his ulcers react more violently. He washed his face and combed his hair, but did not even try to shave.

Robar came in with his breakfast tray at eight and put it on the table. Colucci ignored it, lying facing away from the table.

"Nice hot cereal this morning, Joe," Robar said pleasantly, "with two crisp slices of bacon on the side, buttered toast, grape jelly and some nice cold milk. Milk's good for your ulcers, isn't it, Joe?"

Colucci did not answer or even look at Robar. If he did not respond in any way, maybe Robar would cut short the torture and leave him alone to think things out.

"Not hungry, huh?" Robar asked.

Colucci clenched his jaw and remained silent. The aroma of the bacon was beginning to reach him.

"Well, I'll just leave the tray here, Joe," the big guard said, "in case you work up an appetite later."

Colucci heard the doors open and close again and lock. He got up quickly and hurried over to the table. The tray was uncovered. Colucci peered suspiciously at the food. He wondered if he dared eat just a little of some one dish. The steaming cooked cereal looked particularly inviting; but that was probably the most easily poison-

able dish on the tray. The toast maybe? No, not that; the bread had come from the big bakery ovens in the jail kitchen and some money-hungry convict baker might easily have rolled a special loaf just for Joe Colucci. What about the milk? That would be the best thing for him, at least for his ulcers; but like the cereal, it was too easily poisoned. That left only the bacon. Was it possible to poison a strip of fried bacon?

Colucci heard a chuckle behind him and whirled to see Robar grinning at him through the peephole in the door.

"Go ahead, Joe," the guard prompted jeeringly, "go ahead and have breakfast—"

Colucci grabbed the big cereal spoon from the tray and hurled it at the door. It rebounded harmlessly away from Robar, who laughed aloud at his prisoner.

"Temper, temper, Joe," Robar chided. He closed the peephole, still laughing.

Colucci did not touch the food, not even the bacon. He went back to his cot and forced himself to lie there quietly. After awhile he somehow managed to drift off to sleep.

When he awoke again it was nearly noon. The breakfast tray was gone. But Landman, the day guard, had arrived with lunch. He came over and put the tray on Colucci's chair next to the cot.

"How are you today, Joe?" he asked.

"I'm still here," Colucci said tightlipped.

"Give any more thought to what we talked about yesterday?"

"Yeah," Colucci said.

"What did you decide?"

"I decided to have some friends of mine put your feet in cement and drop you in the river," Colucci told him with as much relish and delight at the thought as he could muster. Landman laughed.

"That might worry me, Joe," he said, "except you don't have any friends anymore. Come on now, let's you and me talk a deal."

"No deal," Colucci said.

Landman sighed heavily. "Guess you wouldn't care for any lunch then. Shame, too, Chicken soup, assorted cold cuts, sliced cheese, bread and butter, milk and rice pudding."

Landman picked up the tray and left. Colucci rolled over and stared at the clock. Twenty-four hours to go.

During the afternoon he was sick twice. The acid was building up in his empty, shrinking, screaming stomach.

The more severe pain of his ulcers festering did not begin until suppertime. He suffered terribly all

the while Landman was trying to tempt him with beef pie, potatoes, milk and chocolate cake; but he managed to present a calm outward appearance so the sadistic day guard would not have the satisfaction of knowing that his insides were on fire. Finally Landman simply gave up on his victim for the day, took the supper tray away, and went off duty.

After that, there was Thorn. The big-eyed young night guard again sympathized with Colucci's predicament, all the while telling Colucci about the fabulous supper he had eaten just before coming on duty; a meal he described so lavishly it sounded as if he might have dined at the White House. Colucci silently tolerated the supposedly subtle persuasiveness which, coming from the immature Thorn, sounded more like the boasting of a loud-mouthed adolescent. The hungry man listened attentively, looking right at Thorn all the while, but did not respond in any way. Colucci's attitude finally got on Thorn's nerves and an hour later he left in complete frustration, locking Colucci in for the night.

Then there was only the long night to face; fourteen hours of being totally alone, with only the gnawing hunger for a companion. Colucci went to bed and tried to force himself to sleep; but he could not. The ruthless, maddening, animal starvation was consuming him; its pressure was relentless. Colucci felt he had to move around, keep active in some way, or else he would go raving mad before morning. Somehow he found the strength to do it. He got out of bed and slowly paced the length of the room until dawn.

At 9:00 Vince was there, three hours earlier than Colucci had predicted. The prisoner, weak now almost to the point of total collapse, had to brace himself against the wall in order to stand up to look through the peephole and identify his visitor. When Vince was let in and the door closed behind him, Colucci stumbled back to his cot, asking haltingly, "What —did—Martino say?"

"He said okay," Vince told him. "He said it was a deal. The million-dollar bounty is off you."

Colucci slumped down, burying his face in his hands. It's over, he thought. As soon as the story gets in the papers I'll be safe again. Safe again—

He looked up at his son through dark-welled, bloodshot eyes. That was when he saw, for the first time, the small white bakery bag that Vince carried.

"What—what's that—?" he asked almost dumbly, his heart

seeming to climb up into his throat.

"Donuts," Vince said. "I remembered you used to like them."

Colucci's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Where'd you get them?"

"A little bakery near the train station. Why? What's the matter?" Then, recognizing the animal suspicion etched in his gangster father's face, Vince continued, "Oh, I see. You don't trust me, is that it? You think I'd sell you out for the money, don't you? Well," Vince's voice grew very quiet, very sincere, "you're wrong." He opened the bag and took out a donut. Looking straight into his father's eyes, he began eating it.

Colucci forced himself off the cot and stumbled over to Vince. Clutching at the bag his son held, he grabbed a donut and crammed it nearly whole into his mouth, reaching with both hands for another even before he had swallowed the first. Like a starving dog he ate in perpetual motion, stuffing as much into his mouth as space and breath would allow. Vince gradually let go of the bag and Colucci took it into his own hands. Feeling suddenly ill, he staggered weakly back to his cot and sat down. The nausea passed quickly and he tore the bakery bag apart on his knees and resumed gorging himself. It was a sickeningly exhilarating feeling to eat again, to put food into his mouth and chew the taste out of it, to feel it bringing wakefulness back to his dry, dying stomach.

Colucci ate and ate and ate, until all the donuts were gone. Then he looked up. Vince was gone too.

Around the corner from the jail, Dr. Vincent Collins entered a waiting taxi. He sighed heavily as he settled back in the seat for the drive to the airport.

At least, he thought, he hadn't lied to his father. He hadn't done it for the money, not really; he had done it for the research hospital and for the hundreds of children he hoped would someday be cured there.

Vince, rationalizing thus, opened a small vial of antidote and poured it down his throat.

'Tis lamentable to profit from another's misfortune, yet bear in mind, "Four things come not back: the spoken word; the sped arrow; time past; the neglected opportunity."

FRANK TWEDDLE, attorney, although addicted to shady and unscrupulous practises, had never done anything actually criminal until he got involved in a jury-tampering case. He thought he had handled the matter with the utmost discretion, but the Bar Association had heard about it and was about to start an investigation. There was one witness who could ruin him, if he got a chance to testify, and he was worried. Perhaps this was why "Frankie" regarded his appointment to defend Duane Duncan with only a fraction of his usual interest and enthusiasm.

On a hot summer morning he parked his sports car near the jail

and approached the Sheriff's office. As he paused to mop sweat from his round, ruddy face, his big nose shone like the stop light on a car.

When he entered the Sheriff's dingy office, fanning himself with his Panama hat, the lanky officer looked up. His keen gaze took in the middle-aged shyster's rumpled blue suit, soiled shirt, and run-over shoes, and his scraggly grey mustache seemed to curl in disdain.

"Howdy, Tweddle," he said, leaning back in his creaky swivel chair. With a gnarled hand he gestured toward a seat on the opposite side of the battered oak desk. "Set."

Frankie sat. "Howdy, Sheriff," he grunted. Taking a fat cigar from his breast pocket without offering the officer one, he lit it and took several puffs.

"You've got Duane Duncan in custody," he stated. He squinted fiercely, a habit he had formed in an effort to hide his widely popping eyes which, he knew, gave surprise and amazement.

"Right," answered the officer. 'Brought Rail in last night." He looked at the zircon ring on the lawyer's chubby finger in sharp disapproval. "Everybody calls Duane 'Rail'. You'll know why when you see him."

"Charged with manslaughter?"

"Right."

"Confessed?"

"Well—sort of."

"What do you mean—sort of?"

"Well, he told the darndest yarn I ever heard in all my born days. I don't know if he's gone crazy, or if he's full of that mountain dew that he makes back there in the hills."

"Can I talk to him?"

"Guess so. If you're his attorney."

"I am. Court appointed me."

The officer led Frankie down a gloomy corridor that smelled of unwashed bodies and disinfectant, to a cell at the back of the jail. He unlocked the door, then walked away, jingling his keys.

"Holler when you're done."

Frankie sat on a bunk opposite Rail and stared at him speculatively. Rail's yellow hair looked like a wind-blown straw heap, his skinny-face had a sickly pallor, his hands were never still. His faded blue shirt and jeans seemed to give off stale whisky fumes.

"Tell me about it, Rail," said Frankie from one side of his cigar.

"You'll never believe me," moaned Rail. His milk-blue eyes, set too close together, were full of misery. "Nobody will ever believe me."

"Try me," said Frankie.

"Do you reckon there's such things as flying saucers?" asked Rail weakly.

"You were right the first time. I don't believe you."

"But you gotta believe me. You gotta listen anyway."

"All right, fella, go on."

"It was night 'fore last. Me and my old woman had just had a ruckus; she nags me somethin' awful, and I went out on the back stoop to cool off. I never hit her in all my life, though I've plumb felt like doin' it sometimes."

Frankie had seen Rail's wife. Built like a battleship, Luella could have broken Rail into bits, and Frankie could well believe that Rail would never dare to lift a hand against her.

"Go on."

"It was just about sundown when I seen this queer thing in the sky. It soared along like a turkey buzzard, but it didn't make no racket, and it looked like it came to earth the other side of Old Baldy. Honest, Mister, I seen it just as plain as I see you right here afore me."

Frankie snorted in disbelief. "What did you do? Go out there and hitch a ride?"

"I knowed you wouldn't believe me," Rail said defiantly, "but I know what I seen."

He stood up for a moment and rubbed his skinny rump. The bunk he was sitting on was hard. "I snuck out there and went up over the knob. Just as I got to the top, I seen that thing fly away. Then I looked down in the clearin' and I could see where it had squatted down in the dirt like a big bird. And somethin' was layin' there with the last rays of sunlight glitterin' on it."

"I suppose you went out there

and picked it up," Frankie remarked, knocking the ash from his cigar, "but what has this fairy tale got to do with the manslaughter charge against you?"

"I'm comin' to that, Mister, if you'll just listen."

"All right, Rail, I won't interrupt again."

"I went down in the holler and got that thing. At first I cal'lated it was just a plaything, like you give a kid at Christmas time. It looked like one of these here toy death-ray guns that young'uns play with when they're lettin' on that they're men from Mars."

"Is that all it was?"

"That's all I allowed it was then. But now I know it was dropped out of that flyin' saucer."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I brung it home, thinkin' I'd give it to one of my kinfolk's kids. I and Luella ain't got no kids of our own, you know. So I toted it home with me, and when I went in the house, Luella started in on me all over again. She gave me billy-blue-blazes for wanderin' around on the hills when she wanted me at home. She called me every name she could think of, and she got so mean that I plumb blew my top. That's when it happened."

"What happened?"

"I started yellin' right back at her. Then I pointed that thing at her and I says, 'If this thing was a real gun, I'd shoot you plumb dead-center, like this.' Then I pulled the trigger."

"You're nuts!" exclaimed Frankie.

"But I shore did! And this is the part nobody'll ever believe."

Half-pleadingly and half-defiantly, Rail looked at the lawyer. He had been called worthless, shiftless, and a drunk, but this was the first time he had ever been called crazy, and he was miserable.

"When I squeezed the trigger on that thing—and mind you, I thought it was a plaything—a flash like chain lightnin' came out of the muzzle. Then Luella turned into a cloud of smoke, like the haze over the mountains on a fall day, and just faded away. There wasn't nothin' left but—but—empty air."

"You don't expect me to credit that, do you?"

"Honest to God made little apples, Mister Tweddle, that's just what happened. I hope He strikes me deaf and blind, if that ain't just what happened."

Frankie realized that Rail sincerely believed that he was relating an actual experience or, superstitious as he was, he would never have sworn such an oath. He stared at the grimy bars thoughtfully.

Luella had disappeared, and the Sheriff evidently believed that Rail had done away with her. Was she hiding from Rail to punish him? Possible, but not likely. Or had Rail killed her, then dredged up this story from his subconscious to mitigate guilty thinking? Psychopaths did that sometimes. Or did they? Frankie wasn't quite sure, but probably the best defense would be a plea of insanity.

If Frankie wasn't disbarred for jury tampering before he could bring the case to trial, that is!

"Sure she isn't playing a trick on you?" the lawyer asked. "Maybe she's hiding somewhere."

"No, she ain't. I looked all over for her. Like I says, she was there, big as life, one minute. Then the next minute, she was gone into thin air."

Rail's voice broke. "You gotta get me out of this. Luella's a Hatfield, and them Hatfields is a mean lot. When they find out she's gone, they're just liable to start a lynchin' party."

Frankie thought of another question. "What did you do with this—er—deadly weapon?"

"I hid it in a holler tree beyond the henhouse. If you got it, do you think you could sort of explain things to the judge and get me off?"

"Maybe we can work something out," Frankie said evasively. "I'll go out there now." And see what really did happen, he added mentally.

In a few minutes, Frankie was driving his second-hand car out the winding, rutted road into the mountains. Rail's wretched farm lay on the side of a barren hill known as Old Baldy. As scrawny hens and razor-backs scattered noisily in every direction, the lawyer drove into the yard and parked by the sagging front porch.

Getting out of the car, he yelled, "Anybody home?"

There was no answer. He entered the ramshackle dwelling and went from room to cluttered room. There was nobody there. He searched the tumble-down barn, but there was no sign of Luella. The mule had nothing to eat. Frankie took pity on him and let him out where he could graze and get water.

He went past the henhouse to a big hollow oak. He started to reach his hand into the hole in the trunk, then thought better of it. There might be a wasp's nest or something else unpleasant inside. He got a stick, poked it inside, and moved it about. Something gave out a metallic sound. Gingerly he reached into the dark interior and brought out a strange object.

"Just as I thought—a toy. Some

kid lost it and Rail found it. Then, in shock after killing his wife, he imagined that fairy story to rationalize his act. I'll have to study up on psychiatry now for sure."

As he stood there, a shadowy form, grey and white, with enormous ears, emerged from the dense woods a few yards away. With a blood-curdling growl and gnashing teeth, it approached the trembling lawyer.

If there was one thing Frankie was afraid of, it was a vicious dog and, if he had known that Rail owned one, he never would have ventured out here. Being too fat to run, he backed up against the tree with stark terror in his eyes.

The dog advanced menacingly, his lips curled in a savage snarl. Frankie tried desperately to overcome his fear and assume a confident demeanor. Perhaps he could win over the animal.

"Nice doggy!" he said shakily, but the canine ignored his advances and acted even more ferocious.

Realizing that he was getting nowhere with pretended kindness, he tried to frighten the animal. Pointing the weapon at the dog, he yelled, "Get away from here, or I'll kill you!"

As the dog came still closer, Frankie's shaking finger involuntarily squeezed the trigger. Then, to his amazement, a blinding flash issued from the gun. As if suddenly frozen in his tracks, the dog stiffened, then turned into a cloud of smoke which drifted harmlessly away.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "I never would have believed it in a thousand years, but Rail was telling the truth."

For a long time he stood there, looking down at the weapon in his hand. His expression of terror and amazement gradually changed to one of simple disbelief. Then disbelief gave way to certainty, and a sly, calculating look crept over his face.

Frank said, aloud, "Tonight I think I'll make a call. Yes, sir, I'm going to make a call on the witness who says he's going to testify that I tried to bribe a juror!"

DÉAC

Repetition may, in some instances, create monotony; however, it may also be efficaciously used to underscore a message.

As he moved, noiselessly, along the narrow asphalt walkway, his eyes searched the pleasant surroundings of the quiet park. He thought about the girl he was looking for, pictured her in his mind, knew that she had to be found tonight, tonight in the next few hours.

He had started in downtown L.A., seven nights ago, had moved, relentlessly and systematically, westward through the city, pausing in a hundred dingy bars, wandering through the smoky lobbies of a dozen cheap hotels.

Now, he had gone as far west as he could go without boarding a boat. The city and the land ended. The ocean took over.

The Chamber of Commerce of Santa Monica sign had welcomed him to this grassy park, shaded by towering palms and bordered along one edge by a jagged cliff that provided an aura of danger for the sightseers. It was called Inspiration Point Park.

The headache, more agonizing now than ever before, pounded at his temples without mercy. The pressure, steadily mounting for a week, since this latest search had begun, threatened to blow apart his skull.

His pace slackened. With his left hand he massaged the back of his neck. So tight, the muscles there so tense. His shoulders, too, were locked and aching from the tension that gripped his body.

His right hand remained in the pocket of his neatly tailored sport jacket, his fingers around the smooth wooden handle of the ice pick.

He stopped, his attention drawn to the sun just disappearing into the ocean, a gold coin slipping into a magic slot along the blue horizon.

"Beautiful," he murmured, "beautiful."

He stood perfectly still for several minutes, admiring the sight, his hands resting on the top board of the low fence that traced a wavy line ten feet back from the sheer drop-off. Two hundred feet directly below him ran the Coast Highway. Along the other side of the road stood a line of fancy swimming clubs interspersed with expensively rustic private beach houses. The sandy beach, continually attacked by the onslaught of the pounding, white-frothed waves, was almost deserted. Only a handful of brave swimmers, practically dots from where he stood, bobbed in the surf. Here and there a beach towel being shaken off fluttered in the air.

When the only thing left of the sun was an orange glow at the edge of the horizon, he turned away, saddened. His mind compared it to the sight of a woman dying. But then none of them had died as beautifully as the sun buried itself every day.

He was almost to the end of the park when he saw her. She sat alone on a bench, looking out toward the sea.

He stopped, shammed weariness by taking a deep breath. He adjusted the ice-pick so it wouldn't stick him in the side as he settled on a bench twenty feet from where she waited.

Waited? He laughed to himself. Why was he always so positive they were waiting, waiting just for him?

He studied her face first. Her red hair was cut short, too short for his taste. But it was the right color. She appeared to be reasonably attractive. He guessed her to be close to thirty. Close enough, he thought, close enough for the plan.

As he watched her, she arched her back and stretched her arms over her head and yawned. Her short-sleeved red sweater tightened against her breasts. She crossed her legs after adjusting her skin-tight black Capris.

She hadn't looked directly at him but she was aware of his presence, his attention. Each one of her little maneuvers had been timed for his benefit. He was certain of all this. He'd seen enough of these easy pickups to recognize their tactics instantly.

She flicked open a lighter, torched a cigarette, and sensually inhaled. When she blew out the smoke it dispersed and quickly drifted away on the ocean breeze that raced up and over the cliff.

Finally, she did look at him. Their eyes met. A smile crossed her lips.

Without hesitating, he stood up. She continued to watch him as he walked toward her bench. He sat down next to her, took out a cigarette for himself.

"Nice view," he offered, without looking at her.

"Yes, isn't it?" He saw that she had difficulty forming her words.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Mind?" She giggled. "I was beginning to wonder when you'd get around to it."

Her bourboned breath stung his nostrils. *Pretty well loaded. Good,* he thought, *that's good.*

Neither wedding band nor engagement ring graced the third finger of her left hand, or any other finger. Her skin was dark, suntanned. Obviously, no ring had been removed recently.

Unmarried. So far, so good. So far, perfect.

He matched her frankness. "I've never been called a slow worker before."

"You do all right, Mister."

"Thanks."

He moved closer to her on the bench. She smiled, dreamily, drunkenly.

"Jo's the name," she told him, allowing cigarette smoke to float out of her mouth as she spoke. "Jo, for Joanne. What's yours?"

"David." There was no need to lie to her—she had no more than two or three hours to live.

"Well, Davey old boy, how about a drink or two? Or three or four?"

"You seem to be a few ahead of me."

"Wanna try catching up?" She grabbed his arm and stood up. "We can take care of it in a hurry. Come on, handsome."

He allowed her to guide him away from the bench. When they had gone ten steps he pointed toward the curb. "There's my car."

She waved a careless hand. "Car? Who needs a car?" She giggled at the look of surprise on his face, and squeezed his arm. "My place is right over there."

She nodded toward what looked like a small white building surrounded by a parking lot. The driveway leading into it was no more than thirty yards from where the car stood.

When they reached the very edge of the park, he saw then that the parking lot was actually the top floor of a high-rise apartment

house. What he had thought was a small building was simply the lobby entrance.

A sign told him the place was called THE SURFWATCHER. The Surfwatcher's south side hugged the face of the cliffs. Private verandas on every floor, facing the Pacific, rose directly above the highway. He counted eight stories. The building was set on a plateau at least fifty feet higher than the road.

"You live alone?" The Surfwatcher seemed hardly a haven for single girls.

She nodded. "Surprised?"

"I was just wondering how you could—"

"Afford it? You don't read the papers much, do you?"

"No, I—should I know you?"

She laughed. "I'm no big star. But I have had my face on page one a few times. Kirk Bannister—does that ring a bell?"

"Sure. Plays that part—uh, yeah! Sheriff Pat Grant, on TV, doesn't he?"

"That's the one. The great Sheriff Pat Grant. Ha! If he ever pulled a real gun he'd shoot off his own knee cap."

David remembered now. "And you were married to him."

"Right, I was married to him. But he wasn't married to me. But that's a long, dull story. Anyway, his lawyer sees that I get fifteen hundred bucks a month to live on."

Divorced. The plan had called for a divorcee. *She lives alone.* His mind checked the items with cold detachment. *She has red hair. She's the right age. She's perfect. She's the one.*

They were in the elevator, going down. It ran along the north side of the building, and a picture window showed them the ocean and a string of sparkling lights along the highway, toward Malibu. She stopped the elevator one floor down. He stayed alert, automatically memorizing every step of the way.

The elevator opened into a hallway, dimly lighted. Along the left wall were two doors, 810 and 811. On the right side was 812. Down at the end of the hallway was a door marked STAIRS.

He checked the ice pick again—fingered the sharp tip as she unlocked the door to 812.

He followed her into an enormous livingroom, luxuriously furnished. The thick rug was spongy under his feet. She smiled at his silent appraisal of the apartment.

"It's livable," she sighed as she moved across the room, swinging her hips. She pulled on a drape cord. Floor-to-ceiling drapes, red and gold, parted to reveal a breath-

taking view. She posed dramatically.

He couldn't help it—he sucked in his breath.

"What'll you have, David?" She walked toward a black and gold bar in the corner.

"Same as you," he answered, without looking away from the glass wall.

"Not fussy, huh? That's what I like, a man who's not fussy."

He opened the sliding door and stepped outside. The veranda was semi-circular and completely private. He walked to the four-foot high railing and looked down. Cars moved, silently, along the highway, directly below him. He closed his eyes as a dizzy feeling overcame him. He stepped back, opened them again and looked out toward the vast, foreboding darkness of the deep blue-black water stretching to meet the lighter blue of the early evening sky.

In a moment she was beside him, handing him his drink.

"Long way down," he told her.

"I know. You have to be cleared by a head-shrinker before they let you move in here."

"Suicide?" He tried a sip of the bourbon. It set fires in his throat.

"Uh huh. You know, I had to pay an extra five hundred to get the doc to sign me off. Plus I had to convince him I wasn't the jumping type."

He looked down to the pavement, and knew the plan would have to be altered. Just this one time. He'd never done it before. He had always followed the plan to a letter. But a man had to be adaptable, willing to take advantage of opportunities. He had to be adaptable to situations. And this was turning into an ideal situation.

The plan had called for an ice pick tonight. He hadn't used one before. But then, neither had he seen to it that any of them had fallen from a building. He was saving that sort of thing for the bridge in 'Frisco. But yes. Yes! He was certain now! The ice pick must wait.

She put her arms around him, pressed her lips suddenly, forcefully, against his. The thought of making love to her almost made him sick. It was wrong. One doesn't make love to—

She pushed him back, gently. "Hold on, honey, I'll climb into something more comfortable."

He took the plastic container from his pocket as she disappeared into the bedroom. He twisted off the lid and poured a small amount of white powder into her glass. It dissolved immediately, leaving no residue.

He watched the waves roll in, listened to the steady roar of the surf. He took a deep breath of the

salt spray. The pain in his head was already beginning to subside.

Three hours had passed. Three hours of sitting, and waiting, and looking at her body, sprawled out on the couch. The ceramic ashtray on the coffee table was filled with his cigarette butts. Five minutes after finishing the drink she had passed out cold, on schedule. She hadn't moved a muscle since then.

He walked out to the railing, leaned over and cocked his head to listen for the sound of voices above or below him. Only silence answered him. Silence and the rumbling of the ocean's restless pulse. Two cars, racing side by side, came into view at the south end of the highway. He watched them until they passed the building. The road was visible for miles along both directions. The midweek traffic was light, very light now.

It was time. He took a deep breath. The longer he waited, the more likelihood of being surprised in her apartment. Of course, if someone came in now, all he would have to do is tell them the truth. He had picked her up in the park and she'd fallen asleep on him. Fine pickup!

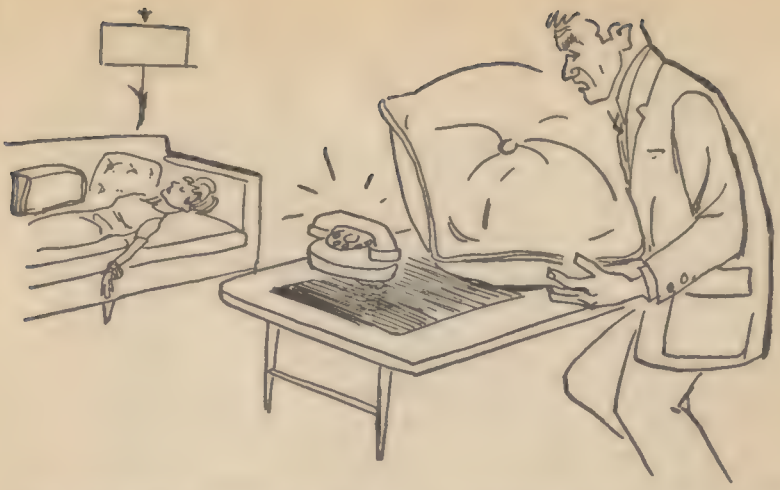
He looked at her face. He squinted, blinked. Her features were changing, hardening, sharpening. Wrinkles appeared on the forehead. Her lips thinned. The makeup thickened and cracked. Her mouth drooped. She looked like an old woman desperately trying to appear young. He recognized her—it was the same every time. He sat down beside her. His head was pounding again!

"An easy pickup, Mother. Such an easy pickup. You always were, weren't you? Everybody on the block knew it. Everybody in school knew it. The pickup's kid, that's what they called me. All my friends. Even the teachers. Remember that history teacher, Mother? Sure you do—old Mr. Foster with the big, fat potbelly. He even tried to get me to fix *him* up with you, said he'd give me an A."

He stood up, and went to the bar. He washed and dried the glass he had used. Then he wiped the faucet handles with his handkerchief. As he walked toward the apartment door, the girl on the couch smiled at something in her dream.

"Dreaming, Mother? Dreaming about getting picked up by some handsome young man? Like me! Like me, dear Mother?"

He fixed the chain on the door so nobody could surprise him until it was over. He dumped the cigarette butts into his coat pocket. As he did, his fingers touched the



ice pick. He took it out and looked at it. He fought the temptation to use it, to use it just once. One little jab wouldn't—no, it could wait. He shoved the ice pick back into its place. He lifted the girl from the couch.

The phone rang!

He froze, stared at her face. Her eyes were still closed.

Another loud ring! Like a burglar alarm in a deserted dime store. He fought an insane urge to clamp his hands over her ears.

As he set her back down on the couch, the next ring blasted into his ears with painful percussion. He grabbed a satiny, giant-sized pillow from the end of the couch. *Don't panic!* His mind screamed.

Another ring. Her arm moved. She was waking up!

He lowered the pillow toward her face, stopped when it was inches away from her mouth. Instead, he forced it down on the white princess telephone, muffling the ring. He waited it out, watching her face as the phone rang four more times. Finally, the room was silent again, a deadly silence that made him fidgety. Her eyes were still closed.

He exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he was holding, moistened his lips with his tongue. He used his handkerchief to lift the receiver, and set it aside on the table.

She seemed much heavier when he picked her up this time. He carried her onto the veranda. The air was decidedly cooler now. He lifted her, held her poised over the railing as he checked the high-

way. No cars in sight. He was lucky.

Her body suddenly trembled—a slight convulsion. She opened her eyes. She looked into his face, and opened her mouth to scream. She clutched at his arms!

He dropped her just in time. He did not stay to watch her journey, much as he wanted to. He turned, quickly hurried through the livingroom, replacing the telephone receiver as he went. He unhooked the chain on the door, looked out into the hallway. Nobody there.

Was that a thud? He looked back toward the veranda. Impossible! It had to be the slam of a door somewhere in the building. Or an extra heavy crash of the surf. Or could it be his own heartbeat?

He stepped from the room, carefully closing the door behind him. The elevator indicator read the second floor. No time to wait for it. He took the stairway entrance.

The parking lot and lobby were deserted when he reached the upper level. He walked, unhurriedly, fighting the urge to run, from the building, then covered the short distance to his car.

Groups of people were scattered around on the park grass, several couples strolled along the pathway, and kids ran around playing tag. None of them paid him any attention.

His headache had vanished by the time he sat in his car. He drove along Ocean Avenue, turned east on Wilshire. He stopped at the first PIZZA sign because it reminded him he had skipped dinner. He was famished.

He woke up, refreshed and rested, late in the morning in a Bakersfield motel room, a hundred miles from Santa Monica.

The L.A. papers were in the lobby when he checked out at noon. The late edition headlines told of a SUICIDE BY THE SEA. According to the papers, the Santa Monica police detectives hadn't even considered the possibility of homicide, especially since Joanne Bannister had tried to kill herself on four previous occasions, and her friends and relatives reported her to be extremely despondent since her divorce.

He was safe. Again.

The time came again in Reno. The periods between the headaches were definitely shortening. It had only been a week since the last one, since that beautiful view from the balcony of the Surfwatcher. Only a week but the pains were back again.

In his hotel room, he set his suitcase up on the bed, snapped open the latch and raised the lid.

He buried his hands among the socks and underwear, his fingers searching until they found the notebook. He took it out.

He sat down before the writing table and opened the plain black binder. He withdrew a folded map that was tucked into the front. He opened it out, spread it on the desk like a general laying out a plan of attack. A heavy, red line zigzagged across the country. He traced its path with his eyes, recalling the events of his trip.

It began in Milwaukee, circled in red with a number one next to it. The line followed the western edge of Lake Michigan down to Chicago, circled with a two beside it. His gaze moved to Toledo, eastward to Cleveland, then on to New York, which carried two numbers, down to Miami Beach, back up to New York, then west to Salt Lake City, doubling back to St. Louis, and south to New Orleans. El Paso had an eleven below it. The blood-red line connected El Paso to L.A.

L.A. was numberless. He wrote a tidy twelve in the blue space of the adjacent Pacific. Then he drew a line from L.A. to Reno. There was no hesitation in his wrist when he jotted the number thirteen next to the town of quickie divorces. He wasn't superstitious, but he knew somebody was in for a stroke of bad luck. It was time to figure out what she was like.

The top page in his notebook was neatly laid out with a series of straight-lined columns. The headings across the top of the page were: number, city, name, age, occupation, color hair, marital status, lives with, method. As neat as a CPA's ledger.

The top line read: 1, Milwaukee, Ellen Farley, 37, prostitute, blond, single, alone, knife.

The second line told a different story: 2, Chicago, Pat Darr, 23, dental assistant, red, single, mother and father, strangled with stocking.

Now, he carefully filled in the data for number 12, remembering what he'd read in the papers: 12, Joanne Bannister, 29, Santa Monica, actress, red, divorced, alone, dropped from building.

The master plan—to insure that he would vary the ages, hair colors, occupations, types of girls, the means he used to kill them.

Only he, David Cronin, knew the common denominator of all the girls on the list. The single characteristic common to all twelve —they had all been easy pickups. And in most of the cases the local authorities had not even realized the girls had been picked up on the night they had been murdered.

He had been careful to move

from city to city. There was no single set of authorities who could detect a pattern or even a connection between the twelve cases. Not like that strangler in Boston. He was bound to get caught.

But a man with a scheme that was foolproof! Perfect! He had committed not one, but a dozen perfect murders. He would never be caught. The next time around the country he would pick small towns. The cycle was endless.

He studied his chart, formed the image of the next girl. She would be a dark-haired girl this time. And she would be single and never-married. And it would be the ice pick's turn.

He encountered no little difficulty fulfilling one of the plan's specifications. He was almost prepared to relax the "never-married" requirement. So few of the women in Reno fit that category he almost decided to deviate, for the second time, from the plan.

But he found her. Of all places, in the cocktail room of his hotel, after looking everywhere else in the city.

She was young, possibly twenty-two or three, hair so coal-black that it looked unreal. She talked easily, but not loquaciously. She was friendly, but not forward. She was attractive, but not beautiful.

After two drinks he knew enough about her to decide she was qualified. She nestled up against him. They said no more until after the next drink.

"Would you like to go somewhere else?" He knew she was ready.

She smiled at him, and shrugged. "Why not?"

They left the hotel, arm in arm. He showed her to his car. He closed the door for her and switched the ice pick to his left pocket as he walked around behind the car.

It was past midnight by the time he found a motel with a flashing VACANCY sign. His head throbbed in rhythm with the blinking neon. She didn't say a word when he stopped in front of the manager's cabin. As he got out, she suggested, with surprising shyness, that she wait in the car while he registered. He agreed it was a good idea.

He used the name of Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Goodman. The manager, a short, bald man with bloodshot eyeballs, took the twenty and laid a key on the counter without taking his eyes from the love scene of a 1940 movie on the late, late show. It was better than David had hoped.

She turned off the light in the room as soon as he closed the door behind him. But enough

moonlight filtered in so that he could see her shadowy form.

"Why did you do that?"

"It's nicer this way, don't you think?"

"Yes," he answered.

"You pick up girls like this all the time, don't you? I can tell."

"Does that matter?"

"It matters very much."

She was facing him. He could tell she was breathing heavily. Her handbag hung from her left arm. She reached into it. Reaching for a cigarette, he assumed. But she would never have time to smoke it. He knew how he was going to do it. He would walk up to her, put one arm around her, and then as he kissed her, he would—

"Don't come any closer." Her voice had changed. It wasn't the soft, girlish voice he had been listening to for the past two hours. It was the voice of an older woman.

He took a step toward her.

The moonlight reflected from something in her hand. It was neither a cigarette package nor a cigarette case. He stared at the gun with a deadly silencer attached to its barrel.

"I warned you, Father." Her words came fast. "I warned you about picking up girls all the time. I told you it would kill mama if she ever found out. But you didn't believe me, did you?"

Her voice crackled with hatred, like that of an old woman. It became a familiar voice. It sounded just like—

"Just any cheap tramp who would give you the eye—"

It sounded like his—but it couldn't be—

"You knew it would break her heart."

It was—it *was* her—she was back again. How many times did he have to kill her? He took out the ice pick. He opened his mouth to speak, "Moth—"

The gun flashed. The force of the bullet knocked him down. She stood over his body, fired a second bullet into his head.

She shook her head, disbelievingly. "You keep coming back, don't you, Father? I keep killing you—but you keep coming back."

Dissimulation is believed to be innate in woman, yet her maternal instinct seems to endow her with the subtlety to distinguish between imagination and fact.

Winter Kill

"MOTHER! Come here!"

There was something in her daughter's voice that brought Margaret fully awake in an instant. She jumped up from the davenport where she had been dozing before the fire and hurried into Kathy's room.

"What's the matter?" she demanded, unable to see anything in the dark except the vague outline of Kathy's bed near the window. She fumbled for the lamp on the dressing table, and the next second the room leaped into reassuring view.

"Turn out the light! Hurry!"

Kathy was sitting up in bed, the blankets pulled almost to her eyes, which were shocked to twice their normal size.

Instinctively Margaret snapped off the light and stood stock-still. "What is it, dear? What's wrong?" she whispered.

"There's someone out there. I saw him." Kathy was whispering, too, but even in a whisper her voice revealed her terror.

Margaret stepped quickly to the window and pulled the ruffled white curtains aside to press her face to the cold glass and stare out. A yellow beam of light from the livingroom window shone on the three huge maples that stood stoutly between the little farmhouse and the outside world. For one heart-plunging moment she thought something moved at the edge of the deeply rutted driveway just beyond the trees, but it was only the long dead grass blowing in the March wind.

She stood there for several minutes searching the wintry yard, but nothing stirred except the wind and the dead grass; beyond the small slice of golden lamplight, the

night crouched unseen and hushed.

Margaret turned from the window, and spoke reassuringly to her daughter. "There's no one out there, Kathy. It was just the wind."

"Mother, I saw him! He was leaning against the tree, watching me!"

"It was only your imagination, dear. Come and look; there's no one out there. I expect the wind moved the branches of the tree, and you thought it was a man."

But Kathy was still terrified, and remained huddled in her bed, insisting she had not imagined the man outside her window.

"It *was* a man! I'd just turned off my light and started to kneel by my bed, when I happened to

look out and there he stood! He was on this side of the tree, away from the light, but I could see him."

"It's so dark out there," Margaret protested. "You couldn't be sure."

"I could see enough to know it was a man," Kathy insisted with unshaken certainty.

Margaret dared not think how thoroughly frightened she really was. Their house topped a lonely little hill far back from the main road, and farther still from neighbors. Even if the old party-line wall telephone could be cranked into life, which was always doubtful, there would be quite an interval before anyone could come to their rescue.

If only Jim were at home! There had been many times when Margaret had been glad of meetings her husband had to attend. She enjoyed the time spent alone with Kathy. In the ten years since their marriage Jim had been kind to her daughter, but she always felt the little current of jealousy that was generated by her attention to Kathy, and it was with a sense of freedom that she devoted herself to the child during his infrequent absences. But tonight Margaret would gladly have traded the fun she and Kathy had shared during the evening for Jim's comforting presence. He might be a little stern at times, but she thought of him now with longing.

Margaret tried, however, to conceal her fear from Kathy. To comfort the shivering girl she sat down on the bed beside her and told her about a frightening night she had spent when she was a child, and how she had laughed next morning to find the "shot" she'd heard in the basement was only a jar of tomatoes exploding. She went on reminiscing, as much to divert herself as Kathy. But she was aware that she was almost whispering, and her entire body strained for the sound of their old car.

She was still sitting on the edge of the bed, although Kathy seemed relaxed now and almost ready to accept the theory of the moving tree branches, when she finally heard the familiar motor.

"There's Dad!"

The relief in Margaret's voice gave her away, but it didn't matter now—they were safe! Swiftly she bent and kissed Kathy good-night —it would upset Jim to find her in the girl's room—and hurried out to the kitchen. She turned on the light, and moved the coffeepot forward on the stove. Jim was probably chilled through.

She could hear Jim moving about in the garage, and the next

moment he came through the connecting door into the kitchen. She ran to meet him, and the unexpected warmth of her welcome caught him a little off balance. Awkwardly he embraced her, and then turned to hang his heavy jacket and cap on the hooks beside the door.

"What's all this?" Jim eyed her a trifle warily. "What's this going to cost me?"

Margaret laughed shakily, and moved to the round table in the center of the room. As she set out cups and saucers and brought the cream from the refrigerator, she told him about the prowler, in a voice that trembled a little from relief and reaction.

"Did you see anything?" he demanded.

"No, but Kathy did," Margaret said, pouring the hot coffee into the thick old cups.

Jim snorted. "I thought so! Probably her imagination. Who would be standing out in the cold to watch a fifteen-year-old kid undress?"

"She's sixteen," Margaret corrected automatically.

"Sixteen, then."

Margaret could see that Jim was impatient to be through with what he obviously considered an imaginative child's nonsense, and to get on with the news of his meeting. In the light of his common sense, her own fright faded, and the whole episode began to seem unreal.

Obligingly, Margaret changed the subject to ask him about the meeting. As he answered, she turned on the automatic pilot which enables the long-married to make admiring sounds at proper intervals without really listening.

They finished their coffee, and Jim stumbled off to bed, yawning and stretching. But Margaret lingered, straightening the kitchen. If there was anything she hated, it was getting up to a messy kitchen.

Then before she could go to bed, she had to slip into Kathy's room once more to assure herself the girl wasn't still lying awake, nervous and frightened. As she bent over her daughter, the soft, even breathing told her Kathy was peacefully asleep, but some impulse of caution drew her to the window for a last look outside.

A thin sliver of an old moon had brushed aside the racing clouds, and palely illuminated the frozen yard. As her eyes became accustomed to the faint light, Margaret could make out the bare bushes and dead flower stalks lining the drive beyond the guardian trees. Intently she stared at the tree nearest Kathy's window, un-

der which her daughter claimed to have seen the man standing. Suddenly she realized there *was* something dark lying in the dead grass at the foot of the tree—something that didn't belong there.

Margaret turned from the window, and tiptoed out to the front hall. Softly she opened the door, and stepped outside.

It was only a short distance to the dark object she had seen from the window. Margaret stood listening, but she heard nothing except the pounding of her own heart. The wind had died down; the trees were hushed and still. Nothing moved. Everything looked just as it had on countless other evenings when she closed up the house for the night. She could almost believe there was nothing lying there among the tree roots—almost.

Margaret crept forward, stopping and listening at every step, straining her eyes in the filmy moonlight, and trying to swallow the knot of fear that threatened to close her throat.

Finally, after an endless nightmare of creeping and listening and staring, she reached the tree. For a moment she thought her imagination had deceived her; then she realized she was approaching the tree from a different angle than that of Kathy's window. Swiftly she circled the huge trunk, and there in the pale, dead grass lay something dark and shapeless.

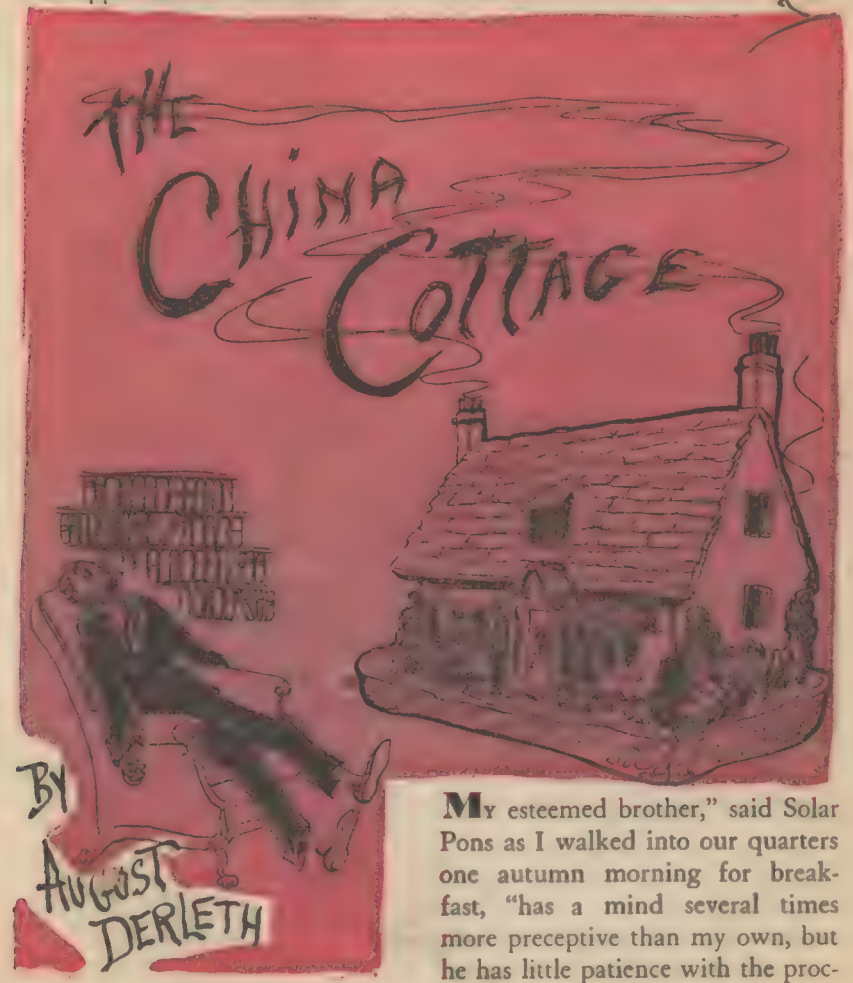
Margaret warily probed the object with outstretched foot. Then, cautiously, she lifted it by her fingertips and ran, it seemed to her with the agonizing slow motion of a dream, back to the safety of the house. Once inside, she bolted the door and sank down against it.

Almost immediately, curiosity overcame both fear and exhaustion; she rose and crept stealthily to the kitchen. Closing the door quietly behind her, she turned on the light and bent to examine her prize.

There in her hand lay the new hand-knitted scarf she had given Jim when he left this evening for his meeting.

Margaret felt her blood drain away, leaving her numb with cold.

While the ordinary intellect may accept the pattern of coincidence without question, one of superior acumen is apt to prove it a happenstance which beclouds the view.



My esteemed brother," said Solar Pons as I walked into our quarters one autumn morning for breakfast, "has a mind several times more preceptive than my own, but he has little patience with the proc-

esses of ratiocination. Though there is nothing to indicate it, it was certainly he who sent this packet of papers by special messenger well before you were awake."

He had pushed the breakfast dishes back, having barely touched the food Mrs. Johnson had prepared, and sat studying several pages of manuscript, beside which lay an ordinary calling card bearing the name Randolph Curwen, through which someone had scrawled an imperative question mark in red ink.

Observing the direction of my gaze, Pons went on. "The card was clipped to the papers. Curwen is, or perhaps I had better say 'was', an expert on Foreign affairs, and was known to be a consultant of the Foreign Office in cryptology. He was sixty-nine, a widower, and lived alone in Cadogan Place, Belgravia, little given to social affairs since the death of his wife nine years ago. There were no children, but he had the reputation of possessing a considerable estate."

"Is he dead, then?" I asked.

"I should not be surprised to learn that he is," said Pons. "I have had a look at the morning papers, but there is no word of him there. Some important discovery about Curwen has been made. These papers are photographs of some confidential correspondence between members of the German Foreign office and that of Russia. They would appear to be singularly innocuous, and were probably sent to Curwen so he might examine them for any code."

"I assumed," said an icy voice from the threshold behind me, "that you would have come to the proper conclusion about this data. I came as soon as I could."

Bancroft Pons had come noiselessly into the room, which was no mean feat in view of his weight. His keen eyes were fixed unswervingly upon Pons, his austere face frozen into an impassive mask, which added to the impressiveness of his appearance.

"Sir Randolph?" asked Pons.

"Dead," said Bancroft. "We do not yet know how."

"The papers?"

"We have some reason to believe that a *rapprochement* between Germany and Russia is in the wind. We are naturally anxious to know what impends. We had recourse to Curwen, as one of the most skilled of our cryptologists. He was sent the papers by messenger at noon yesterday."

"I take it he was given the originals."

Bancroft nodded curtly. "Curwen always liked to work with the originals. You've had a chance to look them over."

"They do not seem to be in code," said Pons. "They appear to be only friendly correspondence between the foreign secretaries, though it is evident that some increase in trade is being contemplated."

"Curwen was to have telephoned me early this morning. When seven o'clock passed without a call from him, I put in a call. I could not get a reply. So we sent Danvers out. The house and the study were locked. Of course, Danvers had skeleton keys which enabled him to get in. He found Curwen dead in his chair at the table, the papers before him. The windows were all locked, though one was open to a locked screen. Danvers thought he detected a chemical odor of some kind; it suggested that someone might have photographed the papers. But you shall see Curwen. Nothing has been touched. I have a car below. It isn't far to Cadogan Place."

The house in Cadogan Place was austere in its appointments. It was now under heavy police guard; a constable stood on the street before the house, another at the door, and yet another at the door of the study, which was situated at one corner of the front of the house, one pair of windows looking out toward the street, the other into shrubbery-grown grounds to a low stone wall which separated the building from the adjacent property. The house was Georgian in architecture, and likewise in its furniture.

When the study door was unlocked, it revealed book-lined walls, the shelving broken only by windows and a fireplace. The walls framed what we had come to see—the great table in the center of the room, the still-lit lamp, the motionless form of Sir Randolph Curwen, collapsed in his armchair, arms dangling floorward, his head thrown back, his

face twisted into an expression of agony. Beside him stood, as if also on guard, a man whom Bancroft Pons introduced as Hilary Danvers.

"Nothing has been disturbed, sir."

Bancroft nodded curtly and waved one arm toward the body. "Sir Randolph, Parker. Your division."

I went around immediately to examine the body. Sir Randolph had been a thin, almost gangling man. A grey moustache decorated his upper lip, and thin grey hair barely concealed his scalp. Pince-nez, one eyeglass broken, dangled from a black silk cord around his neck. He appeared to have died in convulsive agony, but there was certainly no visible wound on his body.

"Heart?" asked Pons.

When I shook my head, he left me to my examination and walked catlike around the room. He examined the windows, one after the other, tested the screen on the half-opened window to the grounds, and came to a pause at the fireplace, where he dropped to one knee.

"Something has been burned here," he said. "Part of the original material?"

Bancroft said peevishly, "A cursory examination suggests that someone burned papers with figures on them, as you can see. We'll collect the ashes and study them, never fear."

Pons rose and came around to the table. He stood to scrutinize it, touching nothing. Most of its top was spread with the papers from the Foreign Office; these were divided into two piles, with one sheet between them, this one evidently being the paper Curwen was reading when he was stricken. A pad of notepaper, free of any jottings, was at one side of this paper. The perimeter of the desk was covered by an assortment of items ending with a small white, rose-decorated cottage of china, with an open box of incense pastilles beside it. Curwen's chair had been pushed slightly back from the table and around to one side, as if he were making an attempt to rise before death overtook him.

"Well, Parker?" asked Pons impatiently.

"A seizure of some kind," I replied. "But I fear that only an autopsy can determine the cause of death precisely. If I had to guess, I'd say poison."

Pons flashed a glance at his brother. "You mentioned an odor on entrance."

"We believe the odor emanated from the incense burner," Mr. Danvers said.

"Ah, this," said Pons, his hand hovering over the china cottage. He gazed inquiringly at Danvers.

"We have tested for fingerprints, Mr. Pons. Only Sir Randolph's were found."

Pons lifted the cottage from its base, where, in a little cup, lay the remains of burned pastilles. He bent his face toward the cup and sniffed. He looked up with narrowed eyes, picked up the base of the china cottage, and thrust it at me.

"What kind of scent might that be, Parker?"

I followed his example and sniffed. "Almond," I said. "They make these pastilles in all manner of scents."

Pons put the china cottage back together and picked up the box of pastilles. "Lilac," he said dryly.

"The room was locked, Mr. Pons," put in Danvers. "No one could possibly have got in, if you're suggesting that someone came and poisoned Sir Randolph."

"Child's play," muttered Bancroft impatiently. "What did he find in the papers that someone should want to kill him? Or burn his findings?"

"You're irritable today," said Pons. "There's nothing here to show that Curwen found anything in the papers."

"On the contrary, there is everything to suggest that somehow someone managed entrance into this room, killed Sir Randolph, and burned his notes."

"Why not take them along? If he were clever enough to enter and leave a locked room without a sign to betray him, he must certainly have known that something could be determined from the ashes. I believe the papers in the grate were burned by Sir Randolph himself. He tore off what was on his pad and what had accumulated in his wastebasket under the table, emptied the wastebasket into the fireplace, and set fire to the contents. The ashes are substantial. There is among them at least a page or two from the *Times*, no reason for burning which I could adduce on the part of a foreign agent. Yours is the Foreign Office approach, all intrigue and espionage."

"It is indeed," said Bancroft shortly.

Pons turned again to the china cottage. "If I may, I should like to take this back to Praed Street." He picked up also the box of pastilles. "And this."

Bancroft stared at him as if he were convinced that Pons had taken leave of his senses.

"This is bone china," Pons said, with a hint of a smile at his lips. "Of Staffordshire origin, it dates,

I should say, to the early nineteenth century. This china, though translucent, will tolerate a surprising amount of heat."

"Pray spare me this lecture," said Bancroft icily. "Take it."

Pons thanked him dryly, slipped the box of pastilles into his pocket, and handed the china cottage to me. "Handle it with care, Parker. We shall examine it at our leisure at 7B." He turned again to his brother. "Sir Randolph lived alone. Surely there were servants?"

"A Mrs. Claudia Melton came in to clean the house twice a week," said Bancroft. "And there was a man-servant by day, Will Davinson. He prepared Sir Randolph's meals and tended to the door. He has come in, if you wish to question him. If so, let us get about it at once."

Bancroft signalled to the constable who stood at the threshold, and he led us out of the room to the rear quarters. In a combination kitchen and breakfast room, there sat waiting a middle-aged man who, immediately on our entrance, clicked his heels together, standing like a ramrod.

"Mr. Davinson," said the constable, "Mr. Solar Pons would like to ask you some questions."

"At your service, sir."

"Pray sit down, Mr. Davinson."

Davinson regained his chair and

sat waiting expectantly. His eyes were alert and conveyed the impression of youth the rest of his body belied.

"You were Sir Randolph's orderly in the war?" asked Pons abruptly.

"Yes, sir."

"You had reason then to know his habits very well?"

"Yes, sir."

"He seems to have been addicted to the burning of incense."

"He has burned it for as long as I've known him."

"You will have had occasion to

ascertain how many pastilles a day he customarily burned."

"Sir, he released the fragrant smoke only when he retired to his study. This was usually in the evening. He seldom burned more than three in an evening, and commonly but two."

"His favorite scent?"

"Lilac. But he also had pastilles scented with rose, almond, thyme, and, I believe, lavender. He always had a good supply."

Pons took a turn down the room and back. He stood for a few moments in silence, his eyes closed, his right hand pulling at his earlobe.

"Sir Randolph was a reclusive man?"

"He saw very few people."

"Whom did he see in the past fortnight?"

Davinson concentrated for a moment. "His niece, Miss Emily Curwen. She had come to London from her home in Edinburgh and came to call. That was perhaps a trifle over two weeks ago."

"No matter," said Pons. "Go on."

"Mr. Leonard Loveson of Loveson & Fitch in High Holborn. That was a business matter. Sir Randolph held a mortgage on their place of business."

"Sir Randolph held other such mortgages?"

"I was not in Sir Randolph's confidence, sir, but I believe he did."

"Go on, Mr. Davinson."

"Well, then there was a great-nephew, Ronald Lindall, the son of Miss Emily's sister, also from Edinburgh; he was at the house six days ago, paying a courtesy visit, I took it."

"Anyone else?"

"Yes," said Davinson hesitantly. "There was a legal gentleman two days ago, all fuss and feathers. They had words, but briefly. Sir Randolph soothed him and sent him off. I believe the matter concerned another of Sir Randolph's mortgages."

"He was a hard man?"

"No, sir. Quite the contrary. More than once he remitted interest due him—even cancelled it. And on one occasion he forgave a small mortgage. No, sir, he was far too easy a man to deal with. Some of them took advantage of him."

Pons took another turn around the room. "Of these people, which were familiar visitors?" he asked.

"Mr. Loveson."

"You had not seen Miss Emily before?"

"No, sir. Sir Randolph had spoken of her, but she had not visited at any time that I was in this house."

"You admitted her?"

"Yes, sir. Sir Randolph never answered the door. If I had gone, unless he had an appointment, he did not answer the door at all."

"Will you cast your mind back to Miss Emily's visit? How did she seem to you?"

"I don't follow you, Mr. Pons."

"Was she composed—sad, gay, what?"

"She seemed to be a trifle agitated, if I may say so. But that was when she left, Mr. Pons. When she came in she was very much a lady."

"She and her uncle had words?"

"I could not say." Davinson was suddenly prim.

"Mr. Lindall, now."

"He was a somewhat truculent young man, but apologetic about disturbing Sir Randolph. They had a pleasant visit. Sir Randolph showed him about the house and garden, and he took his leave."

"Mr. Loveson. Do you know, is the mortgage a large one, presuming it has not been settled?"

"I don't know, but I had the impression that it is quite large." Davinson swallowed and cleared his throat. "I must emphasize again, Mr. Pons, that while Sir Randolph did not take me into his confidence, I was able to come to certain conclusions about his affairs."

"One could hardly expect otherwise of a companion of such long standing."

Davinson inclined his head slightly as if modestly accepting faint praise.

"The gentlemen from the Foreign Office," Pons said then. "Did you admit them?"

"No, sir. They came after I had gone to my flat."

"You answered the telephone while you were here. Do you re-

call any appointments after your hours during the past two weeks?"

"The foreign gentleman, three nights ago."

"Did he leave his name?"

"No, sir. He asked to speak with Sir Randolph. He spoke in a German accent. Sir Randolph was in his study. I made the signal with the buzzer, and Sir Randolph took the call. I stayed on the wire just long enough to be sure the connection had been made."

"You heard their conversation?"

"Sir, only enough to know that Sir Randolph was very much surprised—I took it, agreeably. Afterward, he came out and instructed me to prepare some sandwiches and chill some wine. So I knew he expected someone to come in during the evening. I assumed it was the foreign gentleman."

Pons nodded. "Your leaving arrangements were by your choice, Mr. Davinson?"

"No, sir. That was the way Sir Randolph wished it. He never wanted to be valeted, didn't like it. But he needed someone to do the ordinary things in the house during the day."

"You have your own keys?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"Sir Randolph was secretive?"

"Only about his work. He was a gentleman who, I should say, preferred his own company to that of anyone else. He treated me very well. Indeed, if I may say so, I should not be surprised to find myself mentioned in his will. He hinted as much to me on several occasions, and that ought to be proof enough that he was not unnecessarily secretive."

"Thank you, Mr. Davinson. I may call on you again."

"I want to do anything I can to help, sir. I was very fond of Sir Randolph. We were, if I may say so, almost like step-brothers."

"Was that not an odd way of putting it?" asked Bancroft, when we were walking away from the kitchen. "One says, 'we were like brothers'. Step-brothers, indeed!"

"Probably not, for Davinson," said Pons. "I fancy it was his way of saying they were like brothers one step removed on the social scale, Sir Randolph being a step up, and he a step down."

Bancroft grunted explosively. "You've frittered away half an hour. To what conclusions have you come?"

"I daresay it's a trifle early to be certain of very much. I submit, however, that Sir Randolph was murdered by someone he had no reason to fear. He appears to have been a cautious man, one not given to carelessness in the matter of his relationship with the public."

"You have some ingenious the-

ory about the murderer's entrance into and exit from the locked room, no doubt," said Bancroft testily.

"I should hardly call it that. Sir Randolph admitted him, and Sir Randolph saw him out, locking the doors after him. Until we have the autopsy report, we cannot know precisely how Sir Randolph was done to death."

"We are having the papers gone over once again."

"A waste of time. You Foreign Office people think in painfully conventional patterns. I submit the papers have nothing to do with it."

Bancroft protested, "Surely it is too much to believe that Sir Randolph's possession of these papers at the time of his death amounts only to coincidence?"

"It is indeed an outrageous coincidence," said Pons. "But I am forced to believe it."

"Is there anything more here?" asked Bancroft.

"If possible, I should like to have a copy of Sir Randolph's will sent to 7B without delay."

"It will be done."

Back at our quarters, Pons retired with the china cottage and the box of pastilles to the corner where he kept his chemicals, while I prepared to go out on my round. When I left 7B, he was in the process of breaking apart one of the scented pastilles; when I returned two hours later, he had broken them all apart and was just rising from his examination, his eyes dancing with the light of discovery.

"Sir Randolph came to his death by his own hand."

"Suicide!"

"I have not said so. No, one of the pastilles contained cyanide. It was prepared and placed among the pastilles in the box on the desk, unknown to him. Since he used not less than two pastilles a day and not more than three, and the box contains normally two dozen pastilles, we can assume the poisoned pastille was placed there not more than twelve days ago. From the ashes in the china cottage it is possible to determine that the cyanide was enclosed in inflammable wax, and this enclosed in the customary formula. Sir Randolph fell victim to a death trap which had been laid for him by someone who both knew his habits and had access to his study."

"I thought it poison. What was the motive?"

"It was certainly not the papers, as was evident the moment I concluded that the incense burner was the source of Sir Randolph's death. That faint odor of almond, you will remember, was indicative,"

"His estate then?"

"We shall see. Only a few minutes before your return a copy of Sir Randolph's will arrived. I was about to examine it."

He crossed to the table, took up the sealed envelope laying there, and opened it. He stood for a few moments studying the paper he unfolded. "An admirably clear document," he murmured. "To his faithful servant, Will Davinson, twenty-five hundred pounds. To Miss Emily 'who is otherwise provided for,' the sum of five hundred pounds. To Mrs. Claudia Melton, two hundred pounds. The bulk of his estate distributed equally among five charitable institutions. All mortgages forgiven!"

"There is certainly not much in the way of motive there," I said.

"Murder has been committed for as much as ten pounds," said Pons. "And less. But hardly with such care and premeditation. I fancy the stake was considerably more than two or five hundred pounds."

"Davinson has motive and opportunity."

"He could hardly deny it," observed Pons with a crooked smile. "He knew he was mentioned in the will. He told us as much."

"Rack up one point against his having planned Sir Randolph's death."

"I recall your saying often that when all the impossible solutions have been eliminated, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Parker continued, "Davinson spoke of a foreigner, a German, who visited Sir Randolph only a few days before his death."

"We have only Davinson's word for it," said Pons.

"If not the papers from the Foreign Office, we seem to be left with only Sir Randolph's estate for motive," I pointed out, with some asperity.

"His estate seems to be well accounted for."

"The mortgage holders!" I cried.

"I have thought of them. Even before I saw this document, I suggested that some inquiry be set afoot about them. But I venture to predict it will be disclosed that Sir Randolph did not hold many unpaid mortgages, and that the total sum involved is not as large as Davinson, for one, believed."

"The man Loveson?"

"I have not forgotten him. His will very probably turn out to be the largest outstanding mortgage. He may have had motive in addition to having opportunity. The probability, again, is remote, for it must surely have occurred to him, should any thought of killing Sir Randolph have crossed his mind, that his motive would be instantly

perceived. Moreover, we have Davinson's word for Sir Randolph's lenience with his debtors, and this is given adequate support by the terms of Sir Randolph's will, forgiving his mortgages. No, there is something else here of which we have as yet no inkling, something that induced his murderer to go to great pains to prepare a deadly pastille, secrete it among those on the table during the time of his visit with Sir Randolph—or his secret entry into the house, if it were that—and then be safely away when his victim by chance selected the poisoned pastille for use. It was all very carefully premeditated; there was nothing impulsive about it. That is why, patently, the papers have nothing to do with the matter, for whoever put the pastille into the box did so well before even Sir Randolph knew that he would be sent the papers for examination. By the same process of deduction, the foreign visitor lacked motive—if there were such a visitor."

"And if not?"

"Then, I fear, we should have to put Davinson through it. But there is little reason to doubt Davinson's story. A foreign visitor to Sir Randolph is not unlikely. And Davinson does not seem to me to be capable of so elaborate a plan."

"Who then?"

"We must consider that Davinson was gone by night. Sir Randolph was alone. He could have given entry to anyone he pleased, regardless of what Davinson believes."

"Well, then, we get back to motive."

"Do we not?" So saying, Pons sank into a reverie, from which he stirred only to eat, with a preoccupied air, a lunch Mrs. Johnson sent up. He still sat, smoking pipe after pipe of his abominable shag, when at last I went to bed.

Pons' hand at my shoulder woke me while it was yet dark.

"'Can you spare the day, Parker?" he asked, when I sat up. "We have just time to catch the four o'clock from King's Cross for Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh?" I queried, getting out of bed.

"I have an unyielding fancy to learn what the late Sir Randolph and his niece had words about. We lose a day by traveling later. The four o'clock brings us into Edinburgh by one-thirty this afternoon. We shall have ample opportunity to make our enquiries of Miss Emily Curwen. You will have hours to sleep on the train."

"Miss Emily!" I cried. "For five hundred pounds? Preposterous!"

"Unlikely, perhaps, but hardly preposterous," retorted Pons. "Poison, after all, is primarily a wom-

an's weapon so she is a suspect."

Pons had already summoned a cab, which waited below. As soon as I had dressed and made arrangements for my locum tenens to call on my patients for the next two days, we were off for King's Cross station, which we reached just in time to catch the train for Scotland.

Once in our compartment and northward bound out of London, Pons sank again into cogitation, and I settled myself to resume the sleep Pons had interrupted.

When I woke in the late morning hours, Pons sat watching the lovely countryside flow by. We had crossed the Scottish border, and soon the familiar heights of Arthur's Seat, the Salisbury Crags, the Braid Hills and Corstorphine Hill would come into view. Here and there little pockets of ground mist still held to the hollows, but the sun shone, and the day promised to be fine.

The tranquil expression of Pons' face told me nothing.

"You cannot have been serious in suggesting that Miss Curwen poisoned her uncle," I said.

"I am not yet in a position to make that suggestion," replied Pons, turning away from the pane. "However, a curious chain of events offers itself for our consideration. There is nothing to show that Miss Emily visited her uncle at any time previous to her recent visit. Then she comes, they have words, she hurries off, distraught. Does not this suggest anything to you?"

"Obviously they quarreled."

"But what about? Two people who have not seen each other for many years, as far as we know, can hardly, on such short notice, have much to quarrel about."

"Unless there is a matter of long standing between them."

"Capital! Capital, Parker," said Pons, his eyes twinkling. "But what ancient disagreement could exist between uncle and niece?"

"A family estrangement?"

"There is always that possibility," conceded Pons. "However, Miss Emily would hardly have come, in that case, unannounced and without an invitation to do so."

"Perhaps, unknown to Davinson, she had been invited to come," I said.

"Perhaps. I am inclined to doubt it. Miss Emily yielded to the impulse to confront her uncle to ask some favor of him. His failure to grant it angered her and she rushed off."

"That is hardly consistent with the premeditation so evident in the careful preparation of a poisoned pastille," I couldn't help pointing

out. As usual, it was superfluous.

"Granted, Parker. But there's nothing to prevent such premeditation in the event that the favor she asked her uncle were not granted."

"What could it have been that, failing its granting, only his death would serve her?" I protested. "If a matter of long standing, then, why not longer? No, Pons, it won't wash, it won't at all. I fear you have allowed your latent distrust of the sex to darken your view of Miss Emily Curwen."

Pons burst into hearty laughter.

"Where are we bound for? Do you know?"

"Miss Emily lives in her father's house on Northumberland Street, in the New Town. I took time yesterday to ascertain this and other facts. She and her sister were the only children of Sir Randolph's brother, Andrew. Her sister married unwisely, a man who squandered her considerable inheritance. Both the elder Lindalls are now dead, survived by an only son, Ronald, who is employed in a bookshop on Torpichen Street. But here we are, drawing into Edinburgh."

Within the hour we stood on the stoop of the house on Northumberland Street. Pons rang the bell three times before the door was opened, only a little, and an inquiring face looked out at us there.

"Miss Emily Curwen?"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Solar Pons, of London, at your service. Dr. Parker and I have come about the matter of your uncle's death."

There was a moment of pungent silence. Then the door was opened wide, and Miss Curwen stood there, unmistakably shocked and surprised. "Uncle Randolph dead? I saw him within the month. The picture of health!" she cried. "But forgive me. Come in, gentlemen, do."

Miss Emily led the way to the drawing room of the old-fashioned house, which was certainly at one time the abode of wealth. She was a woman approaching fifty, with a good figure still, and betraying some evidence in the care she had taken with her chestnut hair and her cosmetics of trying to retain as much of a youthful aspect as possible.

"Pray sit down," she said. "Tell me of uncle's death. What happened? Was it an accident?"

"Perhaps, in a manner of speaking, it was," said Pons. "He was found dead in his study."

"Poor uncle!" she cried, unaffectedly.

She seemed unable to fix her eyes on either Pons or myself. Her hands were busy plucking at her

dress, or lacing her fingers together, or carrying her fingers to her lips.

"Perhaps you did not know he left you five hundred pounds?"

"No, I did not." Then her eyes brightened quite suddenly. "Poor, dear uncle! He needn't have done that. Now that he's gone, I shall have it all! All!"

"Somewhat over a fortnight ago you called on your uncle, Miss Curwen."

"Yes, I did." She grimaced.

"You found him well at that time?"

"I believe I have said as much, sir."

"You left him, upset. Was he unkind to you?"

"Sir, it was the old matter. Now it is resolved."

"Would you care to tell us about it?"

"Oh, there's no secret in it, I assure you. Everyone knows of it here in Edinburgh." She tossed her head and shrugged, pitying herself briefly. "Uncle Randolph was as hard a man as my father. My older sister, Cicely, made a very bad marriage in our father's eyes. He had settled her inheritance on her, and when he saw how Arthur wasted it, he made certain I could never do the same. So he put my inheritance, fifty thousand pounds, in trust, and made Uncle Randolph guardian of the trust. I could have only so much a year to live on, a pittance. But the world has changed, and everyone knows that it is not so easy to live on a restricted income as it was twenty-five years ago when my father died. But now all that's over. Now that Uncle Randolph's dead, what is mine comes to me free of his or anyone's control."

"You must have had assistance, Miss Curwen," said Pons sympathetically.

"Oh, yes. My nephew, my dear boy! He's all I have, gentlemen. He has cared for his old aunt quite as if I were his own mother. I've been very much alone here. What could I do, what society could I have, on so limited an income? Now all that is changed. I am sorry Uncle Randolph is dead, but I'm not sorry the restrictions on my inheritance are removed."

Pons' glance flickered about the room, which looked as if it had not quite emerged into the twentieth century. "A lovely room, Miss Curwen," he observed.

"My grandfather planned it. I hate it," she said simply. "I shall lose no time selling the house. Think of having fifty thousand pounds I might have had when I was in my twenties! Oh, Mr. Pons, how cruel it was! My father thought I'd do the same thing my

sister did, even after I saw how it went with them."

"I see you, too, are given to the use of incense, Miss Curwen," said Pons, his gaze fastened to a china castle.

"Any scent will serve to diminish the mould and mildew, gentlemen."

"May I look at that incense burner?" persisted Pons.

"Please do."

Pons crossed to the mantel where the china castle rested, picked it up, and brought it back to his chair. It was an elaborate creation in bone china, featuring three lichen-covered turrets, and evidently three burners. Carnations adorned it, and a vine of green leaves, and morning glories. Its windows were outlined in soft brown.

"A Colebrook Dale marking on this Coalport castle identifies it as prior to 1850 in origin," said Pons.

Miss Curwen's eyebrows went up. "You're a collector, sir?"

"Only of life's oddities," said Pons. "But I have some interest in antiquities as well. He looked up. "And what scent do you favor, Miss Curwen?"

"Rose."

"One could have guessed that you would select so complimentary a fragrance, Miss Curwen."

Miss Curwen blushed prettily as Pons got up to return the china castle to the mantel, where he stood for a few moments with the opened box of pastilles in his hand, inhaling deeply the scent that emanated from it. He appeared to have some difficulty closing the box before he turned once more and came back to where he had been sitting. He did not sit down again.

"I fear we have imposed upon you long enough, Miss Curwen," said Pons.

Miss Emily came to her feet. "I suppose you will take care of such legalities as there are, gentlemen?"

"I fancy Sir Randolph's legal representatives will do that in good time, Miss Curwen," said Pons.

"Oh! I thought . . ."

"I am sorry to have given you the wrong impression. I am a private enquiry agent, Miss Curwen. There is some question about the manner of your uncle's death; I am endeavoring to answer it."

She was obviously perplexed. "Well, there's nothing I can tell you about that. I know he was in what looked like perfect health when I last saw him."

She did not seem to have the slightest suspicion of Pons' objective, and walked us to the door, where she let us out. From the stoop, we could hear the chain

being quietly slid back into place.

"I must hand it to you, Pons," I said. "There's motive for you."

"Poor woman! I'll wager she's dancing around by herself in celebration now," he said as we walked back down to the street. "There are pathetic people in this world to whom the possession of money is everything. They know little of life and nothing of how to live. Presumably Andrew Curwen was such a one; I fear Miss Emily may be another. One could live well on the income of fifty thousand pounds if one had a mind to, but Miss Emily preferred to pine and grieve and feel sorry for herself, a lonely, deluded woman. I shall be sorry to add to her loneliness, but perhaps her wealth will assuage her. But come, Parker, we have little time to lose. We must be off to the police. With luck, we shall be able to catch one of the night trains back to London."

Inspector Brian McGavick joined us when Pons explained his need. He was in plain-clothes, and looked considerably more like an actor than a member of the constabulary.

"I've heard about you, Mr. Pons," said McGavick. "This morning, on instructions from the Foreign Office. I am at your service."

"Inspector, you're in charge here. I have no authority. I shall expect you to take whatever action the events of the next hour or two call for." He outlined briefly the circumstances surrounding the murder of Sir Randolph Curwen. By the time he had finished we had arrived in Torpischen Street.

"Let us just park the car over here," said Pons, "and walk the rest of the way."

We got out of the police car and walked leisurely down the street to a little shop that bore the sign, *Laidlaw's Books*. There Pons turned in.

A stout little man clad almost formally, save for his plaid weskit, came hurrying up to wait on us.

"Just browsing, sir," said Pons.

The little man bowed and returned to resume his place on a stool at a high, old-fashioned desk in a far corner of the shop. The three of us began to examine the books in the stalls and on the shelves, following Pons' lead. Pons soon settled down to a stall containing novels of Sir Walter Scott and Dickens, studying one volume after another with that annoying air of having the entire afternoon in which to do it.

In a quarter of an hour, the door of the shop opened to admit a handsome young man who walked directly back to the rear of the shop, removed his hat and

ulster, and came briskly back to attend to us. Since Pons was nearest him, he walked directly up to Pons and engaged him in conversation I could not overhear until I drifted closer.

"There is merit in each," Pons was saying. Scott for his unparalleled reconstruction of Scotland's past, Dickens for the remarkable range of his characters, however much some of them may seem caricatures. I think of establishing special shelves for each when I open my own shop."

"Ah, you're a bookman, sir? Where?"

"In London. I lack only a partner."

"I would like to be in London myself. What are your qualifications?"

"I need a young man, acquainted with books and authors, capable of putting a little capital into the business. Are you interested?"

"I might be."

Pons thrust forth his hand. "Name's Holmes," he said.

"Lindall," said the young man, taking his hand.

"Capital?" asked Pons.

"I expect to come into some."

"When?"

"Within the next few months."

"Ample time! Now tell me, Mr. Lindall, since I am in need of some other little service, do you know any chemistry? Ever studied it?"

"No, sir."

"I asked because I saw a chemist's shop next door. Perhaps you have a friend there who might make up a special prescription for me?"

"As a matter of fact, I do have. A young man named Ardley. Ask for him and say I gave you his name."

"Thank you, thank you. I am grateful. In delicate little matters like these, one cannot be too careful."

Lindall's interest quickened. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips and asked, "What is the nature of the prescription, sir?"

Pons dipped his hand into his coat pocket, thrust it out before Lindall, and unfolded his fingers. "I need a little pastille like this—with cyanide at the center, to dispose of old men and middle-aged ladies."

Lindall's reaction was extraordinary. He threw up his hands as if to thrust Pons away, stumbled backward, and upset a stall of books. Books and Lindall together went crashing to the floor.

"Oh, I say! I say now!" called out the proprietor, getting off his stool.

"Inspector McGavick, arrest this man for the murder of Sir Randolph Curwen, and the planned

murder of his aunt, Miss Emily Curwen," said Pons.

McGavick had already moved in on Lindall, and was pulling him to his feet.

"You will need this poisoned pastille, Inspector. I found it in a box of rose pastilles in Miss Emily's home. You should have no difficulty proving that this and the one that killed Sir Randolph were manufactured for Lindall at his direction." To Lindall, Pons added, "A pity you didn't ask after my Christian name, Mr. Lindall. Sherlock. A name I assume on those special occasions when I feel inordinately immodest."

In our compartment on the 10:15 express for London Pons answered the questions with which I pelted him.

"It was an elementary matter, Parker," he said, "confused by the coincidence of Sir Randolph's possession of the Foreign Office papers. The death trap had been laid for him well before anyone at all knew that he would see the papers in question. This motive eliminated, it became necessary to disclose another. Nobody appeared to dislike Sir Randolph, and it did not seem that any adequate motivation lay in the provisions of his will.

"We were left, then, with Miss Emily's curious visit, angrily terminated. She went to London to appeal to her uncle for an end to the trust. She came back and complained to her nephew—her 'dear boy' who is 'all' she has—her designated heir, as an examination of her will will certainly show. In a fortnight, familiarized with Sir Randolph's habits by Miss Emily, he paid him a visit on his own, managed to slip the posioned pastille into his box, and was off to bide his time. He had had two made, one for his aunt, and felt safe in slipping the other into her box of pastilles. He might better have waited, but he had not counted on the death of Sir Randolph being taken for anything but a seizure of some kind. He underestimated the police, I fear, and greed pushed him too fast. 'The love of money,' Parker, is indeed 'the root of all evil.'"

The welcome mat before the door is a recognized symbol of hospitality. As with homing pigeons, however, one must be alerted to an occasional preemption by a stray.

THE autumn darkness came quickly that night, creeping over the freshly-plowed fields like a black fog and clogging the state highway that ribboned past the farmhouse.

Into the driveway drifted a clot of blackness which soon took the shape of a man, huge in size and features, but moving as quietly as a shadow. He paused near the house while his glance studied the small light burning above the front door. There were other lights showing behind the curtained windows. Finally he swung his head slowly from side to side, as though debating whether to try the front or the back entrance.

Now he strode out silently, and as he neared the front door he could hear a man's voice within.

When he stopped in the yellow illumination of the tiny bulb and listened intently, he recognized the voice of a newscaster, either on radio or TV.

". . . And police are intensifying their efforts to locate the patient who escaped from the Graham State Hospital this afternoon, after killing one of the staff. Again we've been asked to repeat an earlier warning: although appearing harmless, the escapee is capable of becoming extremely dangerous when aroused . . . More details on that, and an eye-witness account of an attractive blonde in a bizarre filling station holdup, immediately after this important message . . ."

He waited until the commercial had begun before he knocked. Immediately the animated jingle was cut off. Now there was only the stir of light footsteps within the house, then silence.

Although he knew that the screen door was unlatched when he had rapped on it, he saw that the inner wooden door was closed. He assumed that a preliminary inspection of him was now being made through the peephole. Nonchalantly he glanced about, then down at his feet. He saw the blue door mat with THE FIELDS printed in white block letters.

No one answered the door, and when he'd waited the proper interval he rapped again patiently.

"Hello," he said. "It's Gorgon. Bart Gorgon. Bellamy's new hired man. He sent me down the road

to borrow some tools, wrenches."

Again he heard the sound of light footsteps, and a moment later the inner door opened. A small woman with dark hair peered out at him.

"Mrs. Fields?" he asked through the screen.

"What was it you wanted?"

"I'm sorry to bother you on a night like this. I'm Bart Gorgon. Bellamy's new hired man. He sent me over to borrow your husband's set of tools. The one with all the socket wrenches. Bellamy said your husband would know which set."

He saw Mrs. Fields frown as she pushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. "Well, I don't know—"

"I don't blame you for being suspicious, not having met me before. I just went to work for Bellamy today. But if you'll let me talk to your husband, he'll know about the tools. Bellamy set it all up with him."

"My husband—he's not here right now," Mrs. Fields said.

Gorgon rubbed his chin. "Well, maybe I can wait around until he gets back. Bellamy took his wife and kids into town to see a movie. That's why he sent me over. He wanted to be sure and have the tools first thing in the morning." Gorgon nodded solemnly. "I'd better wait around for your husband. Do you expect him soon?"

"No!" Mrs. Fields said quickly. Then she smiled. "What I mean is, I'd rather you came back in the morning. My husband will be home then." She started to close the door.

"Mrs. Fields, could I bother you for a glass of water before I go? That walk from Bellamy's place was a bit farther than I thought."

"Of course. I'll get it for you."

The moment she'd gone Gorgon slipped noiselessly inside and moved just as quietly through the front room. He was standing in the kitchen doorway when she turned away from the sink with the glass of water.

Fright widened her eyes and a bit of the water leaped out of the glass. Angrily she said, "Nobody asked you into this house!"

"Please don't get sore, Mrs. Fields. I don't intend to do you any harm."

"You scare a person to death, sneaking up behind them like that."

"I know." Gorgon nodded, while a smile tried to brighten his ugly face. "I know what you're trying to say. I'm big and ugly and not very smart. You can go ahead and say it because I've heard it all before. Lots of times."

"I didn't mean it that way, Mr. Gorgon, really I didn't. And I'm

sorry. I wasn't thinking about your —the way you look. Here's your water. And then leave. Please."

He drank quickly, emptying the tumbler as though it were a shot glass. Her hand came out to take the glass, but he didn't give it to her.

"You know," he said, "you shouldn't be here all alone on a night like this—"

"I'll be all right. Now if you'll just leave—"

"—especially when I heard them announcing how that patient slipped out of Graham today. That's not too far from here and he could have traveled that stretch by now. And they get awfully mean at times. You just can't tell what they might do, finding a person all alone."

"I believe I can take care of myself, thank you. Now if you'll just leave me and let me lock all the doors, I'll manage fine."

Gorgon frowned and shook his massive head. "You don't understand at all, Mrs. Fields. Doors and windows don't stop them when they make up their minds to get something, or go somewhere. Why, they can get into and out of places as easy as monkeys, and when they get worked up they've got the strength of a bull, and they can break, and tear, and kill. And yet they're no different in looks than you or me. Most people don't know that. Why, you could see one walking down the street, coming right towards you, and you wouldn't think anything about it."

Gorgon tried to reassure her with a grin. "What I'm trying to tell you is, that the one that got out of Graham today could come right up to your door, and you'd probably let him into the house because he wouldn't look mean or wild-eyed. You'd probably think it was just somebody wanting help with a car that broke down, or wanting to use your phone, or any simple excuse like that. You wouldn't suspect a thing. And then with your husband gone and all, he could turn on you, and you might get killed. They're so unpredictable."

Mrs. Fields' face had become colorless while she stared up at him. Finally she said, "You seem to know a lot about those—about those people at Graham."

"I was there two years."

Mrs. Fields stepped back and bumped against the sink. "Oh, no," she said.

Gorgon caught the fear in her voice. Quickly he said, "Not as a patient, Mrs. Fields. I was the gardener. Supervisor of the Grounds they called it. I quit about three years ago."

After a deep breath Mrs. Fields

said, "You certainly had me going there for a minute."

Gorgon grinned broadly. "You see, it's exactly what I was trying to tell you. Because I look like this, you were afraid I'd run away from Graham today. I tell you, looks of a person means nothing. Why, I've seen lots of women there that look just as sweet and as harmless as you, Mrs. Fields."

"Yes," she said, "I can imagine. But I really don't believe it will be necessary for you to wait around for my husband. I won't let any strangers into this house. I promise you that, Mr. Gorgon. And you've been very kind to warn me of the dangers."

"That's the thing, Mrs. Fields. Don't let anyone into your house when you're alone. Better than that, don't even talk to anyone that comes up to the door, strangers, that you don't know. Oh, I've talked to lots of them out at Graham. Lots of times. And the things they'll tell you. You'd swear they were telling the absolute truth, as long as you didn't know any better. Actors, they are, you might say."

"Well, as soon as you leave I'll bolt and lock everything, Mr. Gorgon. And I assure you I won't even speak to anyone that might drop by."

She reached for his empty glass again, and this time he gave it to her.

As she set it into the sink Gorgon said, "I sure appreciate the way you've put up with me, Mrs. Fields. A lot of people, women especially, can't stand the sight of me. When I try to talk to them they either run or scream for help. I don't get much chance to talk to women. And that's all I wanted to do, chat a bit, when I followed you into the kitchen. You don't know how nice it's been, standing here and passing the time of day with you."

Mrs. Fields smiled. "Well, you're welcome to stop by and chat any time—"

When the urgent knocking began at the front door he saw her stiffen with fright, while panic glazed her eyes. Suddenly she began whipping her head from side to side, like a trapped animal searching for a means of escape. Her mouth opened to let out a scream. Gorgon lunged forward, his huge hand smothering most of her face.

Her hands fought the gag and she tried to jerk free of him, but Gorgon slammed her back against the refrigerator and pressed himself against her so she couldn't move. Briefly he listened to the renewed pounding. Satisfied that they were positioned so they could-

n't be seen through the screen door, Gorgon spoke just above a whisper.

"I couldn't let you scream, Mrs. Fields. They'd get the wrong idea. They'd think I'd been bothering you. Then Bellamy would fire me. So you see, that's why I acted like that. It's probably a neighbor stopping to call. Once you settle down I'll let you go to the door."

He felt her trying to speak under his palm, and she squirmed powerfully, trying to slip away from him.

"Come on now, Mrs. Fields. Relax, the way you were when we were talking. It's probably just a friend that's come visiting. I can't have you going to the door all upset, because that wouldn't be good for me. I know. I'm going to turn you loose in a minute so you can go to the door. If it's someone you know, then they'll see that we've just been visiting a bit out here. And if it's a stranger out there, don't worry, I'll take over. I'll see to it they don't harm you."

Slowly he slipped his hand away from her face, and then he took her arm. Gently he moved her forward so that both of them came out of the kitchen together and walked into the front room.

He stopped then, and Mrs. Fields continued walking towards the door. Through the screen he could distinguish the figure of a slim blonde girl.

In a frightened voice Mrs. Fields asked, "Who is it?"

"I need some help with my car. I've got a flat out on the highway."

"Come in, my dear."

Gorgon stood quietly, watching the girl as she entered. She was young, wearing a black sweater and slacks. The soiled and wrinkled trenchcoat was open in the front, and it was way too big for her.

The girl smiled. "My car's about a quarter of a mile from here. Believe it or not, I don't even know how to change a tire."

"This is my husband," Mrs. Fields said. "Perhaps he'd be good enough to change it for you."

Gorgon stiffened, and then he realized that Mrs. Fields was being smart. Because the girl was a stranger, Mrs. Fields wanted him to take over.

The girl said, "Oh, that would be sweet of him." She smiled at Gorgon. "You're a doll."

"Of course he is," Mrs. Fields said.

Gorgon's face reddened. She'd called him a doll but he could tell she didn't mean it. They never did. Fighting the anger in his voice he said, "You women are all the same. Smile and sweet talk a man

when you want some dirty work to be done for you. But when an ugly guy like me wants to talk to you, just to be friendly, you run scared." His breath was whistling through his nose. "Lady, you can get somebody else to change that tire."

When the girl's right hand came out of the trenchcoat pocket it was holding a revolver.

She pointed it at Gorgon's chest. "Okay, Buster, if that's the way you feel about it! Now we'll take your car. Mama comes, too." She stepped back and waved them towards the door with her gun. "Let's go."

"Oh, please," Mrs. Fields said softly.

Gorgon suddenly remembered the newscaster's comment about the blonde and the filling station holdup. Looking at the girl now, and at the gun she was holding, he realized it had to be the same blonde. He'd been careless because he'd been too concerned about the escaped patient.

"Come on!" the blonde snapped. "Move, Creep!"

Gorgon's anger turned his face into a hideous mask.

Grimly he strode towards the door, but suddenly his left arm lashed out. Like a tree branch, it struck the girl's gun hand at the wrist and the gun flew across the room, crashing against the wall.

Gorgon lunged at her, caught her, and briefly fought her legs and fingernails. Then his fist sledged against her chin.

She sank to the floor. As he turned away from her the gun barked behind him, and plaster sprayed from the wall near his head.

Roaring angrily, Gorgon hurtled across the room. Mrs. Fields had the gun up, and she was trying to get away another shot when he crashed into her.

He knocked her backwards, but his rush enabled his long arms to reach out and grab her before she fell. She screamed and fought wildly, trying to get away from him so that she could use the gun. Gorgon clubbed it out of her hand, and then a short chop at the back of her neck knocked her unconscious. She sank limply to the floor.

His face contorted, and gasping for breath, Gorgon scooped up the gun before he planted himself in the center of the room and studied the two women. Then he shook his head. Some women, like that blonde, could never understand how it maddened him when they referred to his looks. He had hit her hard, and she would be out for quite a while. He'd call the police about her later.

Right now, he was concerned

about Mrs. Fields. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning that she would panic in a situation like this. It was a good thing he had stayed around, instead of leaving immediately. She would have been at the mercy of the blonde, and probably kidnapped, or even killed.

Now he had to look after Mrs. Fields. Poor thing.

He bent down and picked her up very gently. He'd take her into the bedroom. That was the best place. He would put her on the bed, and then revive her with cold towels.

He started down the hall, and the first door he came to turned out to be the bathroom. Next to it was another room, dark, until Gorgon switched on the light.

Gorgon sucked in his breath and stared at the woman on the bed. She was a redhead, and she was dead. A knife was imbedded in her heart.

Gorgon scowled. Then he shook his head, trying to comprehend what he saw. Numbly he pulled his glance away from her and let it move about the room.

He saw the colored wedding photo on top of the dresser. The man had a flower in the lapel of his coat, but Gorgon's glance fixed on the white-gowned bride. She had flaming red hair, and she was the same woman now dead on the bed.

Gorgon studied the woman he was holding in his arms.

Why, she didn't look like the one from Graham at all.

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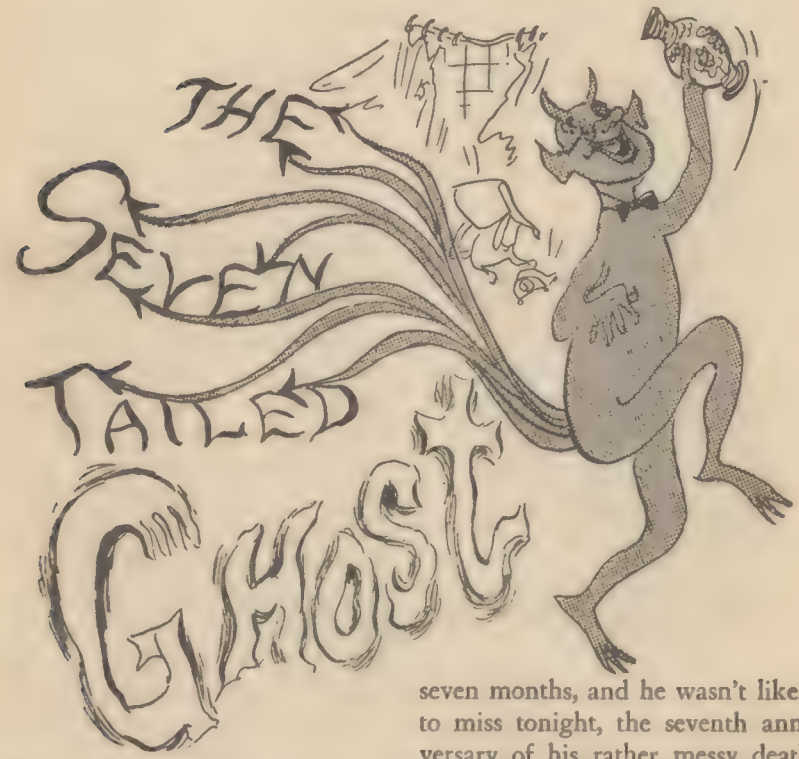
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

2441 BEACH COURT, RIVIERA BEACH, FLORIDA 33404

Aspiring applicants to a society, when given the nod, generally experience a spirit of relief; somehow, I mistrust this phrase is applicable here.

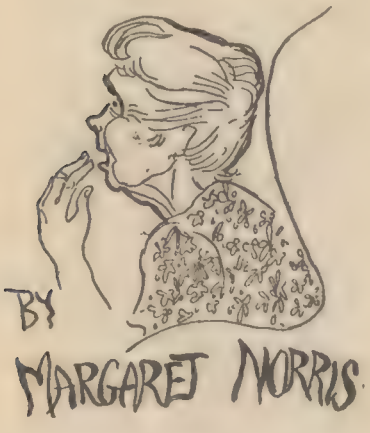


MERRIAM HALLOWAY crouched on a velvet chair in the corner of her large Victorian livingroom and waited for the ghost of her husband, Harley, to appear.

He hadn't missed a night in seven months, and he wasn't likely to miss tonight, the seventh anniversary of his rather messy death. In fact, Merriam was crouching because she expected him to put on a special show. She thought he might bring with him some flames or brimstone, or perhaps a new set of horns to model for her. She

could never be sure how far he would go in celebrating a special day. One of these times, she mused, he would be careless and set the house afire. She supposed she would be blamed for that, too.

Merriam had been blamed for many of Harley's little tricks since he died. There was the time he was demonstrating a new three-pronged fork and knocked over the priceless Ming vase her father had brought from China when she was a child. Merriam had feared



creating just such havoc herself, and therefore wasn't surprised when the nurse, Miss Bingham, had rushed in, tsk-tsking, and slapped her crossly.

"Why did you want to go and do that?" she asked. "You're being a naughty girl again, and we'll have to get out the straight jacket if you don't behave." Of course she couldn't see Harley, holding his sides with laughter in the far corner and mimicking her sharp tone, with his face all twisted and ugly. Merriam had frowned and signaled him to be still, and the nurse slapped her again. "Don't make faces at me," she said firmly. "Respect is very important. Remember that."

Then there was the time Harley flew into a rage because Merriam had become so accustomed to his evening visits that she was no longer afraid of him. He tried to strangle her. It rather surprised both of them that, as an apparition, he exerted somewhat less than live strength. His hold did leave marks on her throat, though, and Miss Bingham retaliated by producing a pair of red rubber gloves and tying them firmly on Merriam's hands with string. "Let's see you hurt yourself with those on," she said, "and—" swinging around as Merriam was about to open her mouth in protest, "don't say it was Harley. I swear, sometimes I almost expect to see your old Harley myself, you describe him so well. But don't go trying to push your silly hallucinations off on me." After seven months, Miss Bingham was close to losing her patience.

Harley was, of course, lying on the floor doubled up with mirth.

He did enjoy it so when Merriam was punished for his misdeeds. She sighed, now, thinking of it. She supposed she was only getting her due since it was her fault that Harley had died in the first place.

The trouble was that Harley had been a practical joker. Not an innocent, pinch-you-in-the-elevator joker, but a man who had never grown out of the little-boy-hurting-flies stage. Only, as an adult, he preferred to hurt people. He drove his car like a madman, leaving behind him a trail of other cars running over sidewalks and up lamp posts to get out of his way. He zoomed his motor boat to terrify swimmers and, indeed, came close to beheading one, here and there. He specialized in exploding cigars, with real gunpowder in them, which was very hard on his victims. And, since people tended to fade quietly away after a very short exposure to Harley, he was constantly seeking new ways in which to infurate his captive audience, Merriam, so that finally even her long-suffering soul was outraged and she threatened to leave him.

Then another of Harley's little jokes was revealed to her. He had juggled her patrimony and managed it badly. There was very little money left, and none at all that Merriam could get her hands on. All that remained was the old house which had been her prison since infancy, first under her domineering father, and then with the outrageous husband that father had chosen for her.

Worse was in store for her when Harley died. Merriam shuddered, thinking about it. She felt responsible for the whole mess, although certainly she had not put the revolver in his mouth, nor had she thought of pulling the trigger until he suggested it as a way of relieving herself of his presence. He could never have believed that she would be brave enough to put a finger on the gun, could he? It must have been another one of his crazy jokes—mustn't it? Certainly his stare was one of astonishment in that last second when she leaned forward and pressed the trigger. He stared, that is, until the top of his head flew off.

Then it was Merriam's turn to stare. For, of course, she hadn't believed him when he said the gun was loaded. In a way, this made the whole thing an accident, so she didn't feel it necessary to tell the police that she had helped. It obviously didn't occur to them that any man would put a loaded gun in his mouth for any reason other than to commit suicide. They didn't know Harley.

Merriam shuddered again. It had been very nasty, indeed, and

she could never quite forget it, especially in the evenings when she was waiting for Harley's visit.

His little trips back to haunt her were his way of getting even. They started the night he died, and after Merriam got over her first shock and terror at his coming, she began to enjoy the feeling of penance they gave her. They filled up the emptiness of her days.

For Harley, being Harley, had arranged his revenge doublefold. He left her the house—*her* house, really—and such funds as were left, providing only that Merriam should have life tenancy, and a private nurse. He had chosen Miss Bingham himself, some time before he died.

So here they had been for seven months—Miss Bingham a despot, turning Merriam's life into a series of petty discomforts and frustrations, and Merriam, brooding and hoarding her tremendous store of patience, learned during her years with Harley.

One of her small satisfactions was in hiding things from Miss Bingham. Like the red rubber gloves. It had taken her hours to get them off, patiently untying the multitude of knots with rubbered, slippery fingers. Then she hid them in a sliding wall panel so the infuriated nurse couldn't find them.

She had paid for that with slappings and starvation.

The other things laid by in Merriam's little hoard came mainly from Harley's tricks. The time he propped the door closed with a chair to keep the nurse out while he tore down all the curtains and ripped them into little pieces, the practical Merriam followed along behind him, garnering the hooks which had held the curtain rods. And when he tore the springs out of several chairs, flinging the horsehair stuffing around with great gusto, so that Merriam sneezed until her eyes ran, she still managed to see the good stout cord which had tied the springs together, and this was carefully added to her store. When Harley unravelled her best black sweater, Merriam patiently rolled the wool into a ball, and hid it. Each time he created mischief, she added to her hoard the bits and pieces left in his wake. It was a curious collection, the pride of her life.

On such occasions, Miss Bingham became very upset. It didn't matter how often she was told that Harley was causing all the trouble, she went right on punishing Merriam. The nurse, after all, couldn't see Harley, and though she listened to Merriam's descriptions and even shuddered a little at times, she was far too sensible a

person to believe in any such ghost.

Miss Bingham had, however, adjusted her schedule so that she was usually on hand during Harley's visits, and rather than reveal himself, the devilish ghost had become quite tame lately. With his nature, it couldn't last.

Merriam glanced at the sour-faced clock on the mantel. Shadows were pooling around the feet of the furniture. Harley was late tonight. Having nerved herself for an interesting evening, Merriam felt a little flat. She shivered.

"If you're cold you should put on a sweater," said Miss Bingham, gliding silently in from the hall. "I haven't seen your black one around lately. I suppose Harley took it?" She was wearing the things that most irritated Merriam—her cross expression, her sarcastic tone and her rubber-soled shoes. I shan't speak to her, Merriam decided. That makes her the maddest. Tit for tat—mouse and cat. She giggled at her neat little rhyme and stuck out her tongue at Miss Bingham's starched back.

"In one of your moods, I see." The nurse never missed a thing. "You get more childish every day." She strode around the room plumping up cushions, no doubt persuading herself that she was earning her pay. "Where's your friend husband tonight?"

Merriam looked beyond her, at the hall doorway. She widened her eyes and licked her lips. Harley had appeared sporting a multitude of tails, each one sharpened and the whole bunch of them weaving about each other in impatience, like an octopus reaching for his dinner. Carefully Merriam counted them—seven. Ah, he remembered the date, then. Seven months, seven tails. Wasn't it a magic number or something?

Miss Bingham followed Merriam's glance, but to her, of course, there would be only the open door to the hall. "He's come, has he? And what does he look like tonight?"

Merriam almost forgot her decision not to speak. She longed to describe the tails, which were rubbing against each other as a man rubs his hands in anticipation of pleasure. She could feel the excitement in them, and in Harley. Oh, he *was* planning something special tonight. Tingles chased each other up and down her spine, and her hands shook.

"I don't like your eyes," said Miss Bingham. "When they glitter like that you're up to something. You just calm down, you hear me?"

Merriam's glance brushed her aside. She was busy watching Harley over the nurse's right shoulder.

He was crouching, flexing his fingers and licking his chops. Behind him the tails waved and stretched in a snake dance.

Miss Bingham spun around. "Don't do that!" For a moment Merriam believed she was speaking to Harley. But the nurse was only reassuring herself that no one was there, for the next moment she seized Merriam and was shaking her roughly. "Speak to me, tell me what's going on," she demanded. Her voice was high with excitement.

Merriam opened her mouth in silent laughter, her eyes still watching Harley over the nurse's shoulder. Suddenly she stared in horrified surprise. Oh no! He wouldn't! Even Harley would never dare . . .

Miss Bingham dropped her hands and turned slowly to stare behind her. The shadows were long in the room now; a car swished by outside, its headlights glaring for a moment in the window, leaving everything a little darker when they were gone.

Miss Bingham shook herself. "Phooey—ghosts," she said, striding to the open hall door. "All we need is a little light on the subject. I swear, though, sometimes I almost believe you really do see something. I'm glad it's not catching." She reached out and flipped the light switch. Nothing happened. There was complete silence.

She flipped it again, down and up. A little sound of exasperation escaped her. "We've blown a fuse," she said.

Merriam was hardly conscious of her. She stared at Harley, and her whole body trembled. She moaned a little as her eyes followed him about the room, to the mantel, where the clock suddenly pitched forward on its ugly face, to the plush chair, which crept forward a few inches, teetered on its bowed legs and tipped over with a crash, then toward the nurse . . .

Miss Bingham stood rooted. She stared at the chair with her mouth frozen in a scream. Never before had she *seen* Harley at work. Never before had she had any real reason to believe that he existed. Now Merriam's eyes rested on a spot not two feet in front of the nurse, and those eyes contained a look of such unbelief, such horror . . .

Miss Bingham turned to flee, stumbled, and Harley's clammy red hand brushed her shoulder. She saw it. *She saw it!* For an instant it rested against her neck, and its cold deadness must have pierced to her very heart. She crumpled . . .

Merriam's face relaxed. Carefully she climbed on a chair to tighten the bulbs in the ceiling fixture, and

the lights came on. She moved the chair a few feet and climbed back on it to unscrew from the beams the three curtain rod hooks which bore the weight of a piece of stout chair-spring cord and, dangling from its end, just at shoulder height, a red rubber glove stuffed with the cold porridge hoarded all week from her breakfast tray. She chuckled a little, remembering her schoolgirl days and how new students were initiated into the mysteries of the upper class by "shaking hands with a dead man." Carefully she set the clock upright, removing from its base the black wool which, with a well-timed tug, had upset it. She untied more wool from the leg of the velvet chair and moved the chair back to its corner. Having thus collected all the items from her hoard of goodies, she tucked them back into their hiding place and looked around with satisfaction. Then, ponderously, she knelt beside the nurse and fingered the ring of keys which meant freedom from this hated prison.

Merriam had never seriously considered escape. Friendless, penniless, heavy with years, she knew there was no place to go. Still, for a brief moment, her mind wandered delightful byways in the outside world and she sighed for what could never be. Regretfully, she took her hand from the keys and moved it to the nurse's shoulder. She shook Miss Bingham firmly. The fun was over. No doubt the punishment would be awful.

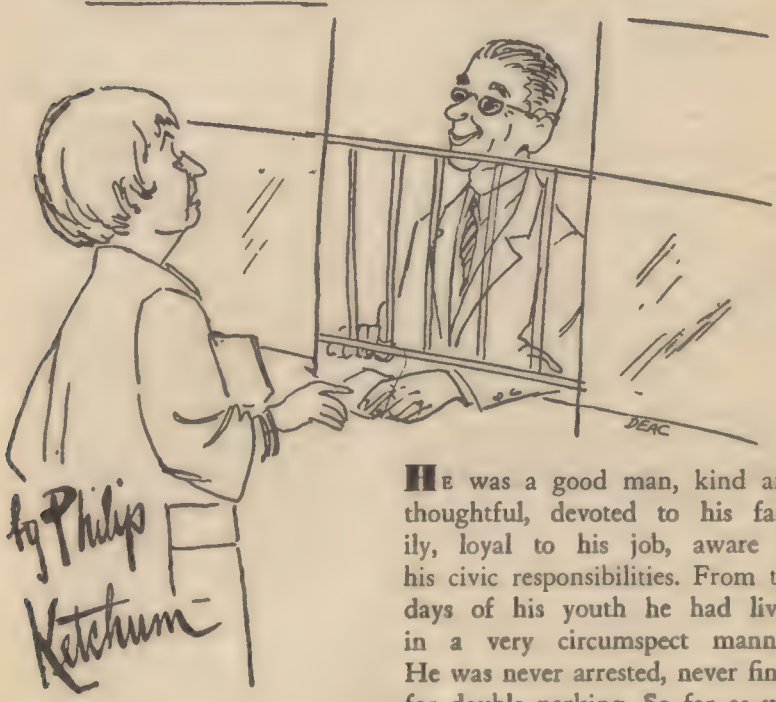
Miss Bingham sat up. Her lips made a small, bubbling sound, and her eyes were unfocussed. After a moment she was able to whisper. "Did you see him?" she asked. "Seven tails. You didn't tell me he had *seven tails!*" Clinging to Merriam's hands with a drowning grasp, she looked over her shoulder. "Don't let him touch me."

Merriam couldn't help herself. After one astounded moment, she threw back her head and bellowed. Her massive frame shook; her sides ached. She pounded Miss Bingham on the shoulders.

"Welcome to the club," she gasped. "Harley will be delighted!"

Albeit a countenance lacking deceit generally depicts a man of character, one might possibly regard askance a calm determination which never wavers.

A MAN OF CHARACTER



HE was a good man, kind and thoughtful, devoted to his family, loyal to his job, aware of his civic responsibilities. From the days of his youth he had lived in a very circumspect manner. He was never arrested, never fined for double parking. So far as was known, he was never in serious

trouble. If he quarreled with his wife, it was in secret. He never lost his temper, never shouted at his children. For forty-one years he had lived in peace, a gentle kind of peace which never disturbed anyone.

His name was George Howell. A tall, slender man, with a fixed smile on his face and a soft and pleasant voice, he never seemed to hurry, but he handled his work at the bank effectively. He remembered people, was aware of their problems, and was sympathetic to their troubles. Mrs. Henrietta Donald told Charles Koch, the president of the bank, it always cheered her up to spend a few minutes talking to George. This was a real tribute. Henrietta was an embittered woman who had little respect for anyone.

A cashier's job was not important, but George made it important. Whether accepting money for deposit or cashing a check, he always offered a smile and a friendly comment. If it was a woman he was handling he might ask about her children, or the family vacation plans. If he was dealing with a man he might comment on the tax cut, or the plans for a new athletic field. He was clever enough to pick safe subjects.

George knew almost everyone in town. Central Springs was not a very large place. The regulars who came to the bank week after week, year after year, he got to know very well. Henrietta, as an example, had been coming to the bank for almost twenty years. George had seen her grow more and more bitter, as time went on. When he talked to her he never said anything to upset her, never touched a moral problem. Henrietta's husband was an alcoholic. Or as another example, when Miss Nettie Cawthorne, a teacher, came in, he might refer to some magazine article on juvenile delinquency. Nettie loved teaching, loved the children who passed through her hands, and worried about them.

That year, when George was forty-one, his wife died of cancer. He took three days off to handle the funeral, then he reported back to the bank. He smiled bravely. To those who showed an expression of sympathy he would respond sadly. Then he would change the subject. He refused to dwell on his own sorrows. Noble, that was what he was; a man, shattered by the death of his wife, but still unafraid.

Now and then he looked back on his life, and it amazed him how empty it had been. He and Laura had been married twenty-one years. That was more than half of his life, but what had he accomplished? During those twenty-one

years, he and Laura had reared two children, but neither had been exceptional in school. Their daughter had been married when she was seventeen, and she and her husband had moved away. George seldom heard from her. Their son had joined the Army when he was eighteen. He was somewhere in Germany. He never wrote.

George was now very much alone, his wife dead, the children gone. He had a house, still mortgaged. He had a car, mortgaged. He had almost five hundred dollars in the bank, and that was all. That was very little to show for twenty years of service. Nettie Cawthorne, teacher and spinster, had done much better. She had saved almost twenty thousand dollars.

George could have explained where his money went. He had not been a spendthrift, a man of poor judgment in money matters. His salary was rather low, had always been low. Over the years it had done little more than pay expenses. Add to that his wife's illness and the funeral expenses, and you have what is left. Just about nothing. Henrietta was bitter toward the world because of her husband's worthlessness and his drinking, but at least she had all the money she needed.

He looked ahead. It was bleak in that direction, too. His salary was still low. It would never be much higher. In time, he might own his house, and his car, and he could afford a short vacation if he did not spend too much money. But that was all. There would be no extras.

This was a sad state of affairs. Ten more years, or fifteen, and people would be considering him a senior citizen looking toward retirement. Maybe he would be able to glow about shuffleboard, or checkers, or quiet walks in the park, but he doubted it. He did not want to be put on the shelf. On the shelf! What a horrible thing to think about. He had never lived!

That was it. He had never really lived. When he re-examined himself, he was amazed at how narrow his life had been, how completely restricted. Trains went through every day but he seldom took one, and never far. Planes roared overhead. Other people took them but he never had. There was a super-highway nearby. He had never been on it.

"It's about time for George to do something about George," he said, half aloud. "Maybe I ought to look around."

"What did you say, George?" asked a voice through the cage.

He smiled and handed the wom-

an a deposit slip. "I said I thought it was going to be a beautiful spring."

"A very beautiful spring," the woman repeated, beaming.

It became spring, then summer. George had another birthday, and the bank employees celebrated it after work one day, providing a birthday cake and bottled drinks from the coke machine. Mr. Koch, the president, honored the event and made a short speech, praising George's enduring loyalty. He even slapped George on the shoulder.

George smiled. He was properly humble. He said the proper things. No one listening to him, or looking at him, would have guessed he was at the edge of rebellion, that his thoughts were almost explosive. George had always been George. Why should he ever change?

As close as George was to a crackup, he had no idea what to do in order to get out of the rut of ordinary living. Habits can become deeply ingrained. That was what had happened to him.

Just the evening before, he had been summoned to the home of Nettie Cawthorne. He had not known why he was wanted, but when he got there he found Nettie in bed, and the doctor and Sheriff Roy Anderson, waiting for him. Then, before the evening was over, he found himself tied up in a civic responsibility he could not refuse.

Nettie was dying from cancer. She might last through the summer, but she had very little time. She had no relatives, but she had saved some money, and she wanted it to be used for needy children. "I have picked you three people, to decide how to spend it," she said, and she smiled. "My doctor, whom I trust; Roy Anderson, who understands children; and George, who is good and thoughtful. I had my attorney set up a trust agreement. If you will read it and sign it—"

George read the agreement and signed it. It did not occur to him to refuse. Things like this, a person did. It was too bad about Nettie, dying. Too bad she had not used the money herself, but Nettie was not the kind to think of enjoyment. Saving the money and spending it this way probably gave her more pleasure than she would have found if she had gone around the world.

Once he had been like that. But no more. George was getting restless.

The next day, when Henrietta Donald came in to deposit a dividend check, he mentioned Nettie's illness, and what she meant to do with her money. This was not gossip, really. Already, the story of Nettie's plans were rather well

known and always interesting.

"A wonderful thing she is doing," George said. "But I wish she could have gone somewhere, had a little fun."

"Is that what you would have done?" Henrietta asked.

"If I had the money, I'd be gone tomorrow."

She looked at him curiously. "That's very interesting," Henrietta said, and she turned away.

George was a little uneasy after she left. He was afraid what he had said had been too revealing. This didn't fit into character, into the shape of what he was like—steady, dependable, safe. Undoubtedly, he was changing.

It was pleasant that evening and unseasonably warm. He didn't feel like staying in. Instead, he headed for the park. Other people were there, walking, young couples, and older couples. A few of the lonely, and a few of the restless. Amazingly, Henrietta was there. He stopped and talked to her for a few minutes.

"I like a small town," she said, smiling. "In a small town it's safe for a woman to take a walk in the evening. That isn't true of some of the larger cities.

"I'll find out—some day," George said.

"Are you still thinking of a trip?"

"I suppose I'll get over it," George said. "But right now, I'd do anything to get away."

"No money?"

"Only the bank's money. If I just took some, I'd probably get caught."

"But if you could take it, safely and—"

"There isn't a way."

"I'd like to go away, too," Henrietta said. "Far, far away. Some day I will."

"You have the money for a trip."

"Not a long trip. I want to go away forever. Someday I'll tell you why."

Three times in the evenings, by chance, George met Henrietta in the park. The third time he took her home. She was a rather attractive woman, not too tall, not too thin, not too heavy. In fact, she was just about right. She might have been a little closer than he, but just a year or two. And they got along very well. She despised her husband, but he had known that for a long time.

That third time, when he took her home, she made a blunt reference to her husband. "This will sound terrible to you, George, but I wish he would die. Are you angry at me?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. I think it is good to be honest

about your feelings at all times."

She leaned toward him. "You're so understanding, so comforting."

He put his arm around her. "You've had a hard life."

"Very hard."

"I wish I could help you."

Hardly realizing how it happened, he suddenly found himself kissing her, and he rather liked it.

They went riding the next night, and he kissed her again. They went riding again, and again. By this time he realized he was in love with her, and that she loved him. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do about it. Henrietta had a husband. He was a poor husband, a faithless husband, an alcoholic husband, a hated husband—but still a husband.

"He comes upstairs," Henrietta whispered. "He is staggering, shaky. If he should ever fall—but he never does. He never does."

George held her in his arms, patted her. "That's all right, Henrietta. It's all right."

"But it isn't," Henrietta said. "I want you. I want to go away with you. If he would only slip some night at the top of the stairs—but he never does."

George moistened his lips. "Some night he might."

"No one would ever question it," Henrietta whispered. "He comes home drunk every night. If he slipped and fell, no one would ever be surprised."

George was silent, but he was thinking. And what he was thinking made him shaky. He could see words, burning like fire through his mind. *He comes upstairs—drunk—staggering—shaky. No one would ever question it if he slipped and fell—or if someone pushed him!*

Henrietta whispered, "We could have such a wonderful life together. But we will never make it, will we?

"We might," George said. "We might."

"No, we'll never make it."

"When does Harold get home?"

"Usually before midnight."

"Are the lights on?"

"Dim lights."

"Do you lock the front door?"

"Not usually. I leave it open for Harold. But I don't want to talk about it."

"We won't talk about it," George said.

"Just hold me," Henrietta said. "Just hold me tightly, and think about how wonderful it would be if we could go away together. Far, far away, just you and me—"

He tried to smile, but it was hard. It was going to be delightful to go away with Henrietta, but it struck him as interesting that he was going to have to pay for it. He

had a job to handle before he and Henrietta would be free. But then maybe that was true of everything in life, that things had to be paid for.

George took Henrietta home about ten-thirty. He kissed her goodnight, but he did it rather brusquely, for his mind was on other matters. Even when Henrietta whispered that she loved him, he scarcely responded. He left her, drove to his own house, then took a walk. He thought, and thought. This helped him very little. The pattern in his mind was very narrow, very tight, and it seemed to be foolproof. He flinched from what he had to do, but there seemed no other way to accomplish his purpose. His purpose and Henrietta's.

After a time George stopped thinking, checked the time, and then walked back to Henrietta's. It was then eleven-twenty. There were dim lights inside. The front door was unlocked. He went inside, found the stairs, climbed them. He made as little sound as possible, and apparently Henrietta did not hear him. At least, she made no appearance.

He waited in the shadows in the hallway at the top of the stairs, and he was shaky, which amazed him. He felt no better at eleven-forty, or at eleven-fifty, or at twelve-fifteen when Henrietta's husband came in.

He was drunk all right. He could hardly make it to the top of the stairs, but he finally got there.

That was as far as he went. George met him, right at the top, and gave him a push. A hard push. That was all that was needed. The man made a lot of noise, tumbling back down the stairs. It killed him. But the sounds failed to waken Henrietta. She must have been sound asleep.

George made sure the man was dead. Then he left the house and went home. He slept very poorly, but that might have been because of his excitement. Now, and without any question, the way was open for him and Henrietta to go away together. They could not do it right away. They would have to wait a reasonable time but that was unimportant.

The people of Central Springs were not greatly surprised that Henrietta's husband slipped and fell to his death, down a flight of stairs. His alcoholic habits were well known. The only amazing thing was that he had not fallen much sooner. There were a dozen witnesses that said, when he left the tavern that night, he could hardly walk.

One other fact about his death was rather interesting. Henrietta's husband had been insured for one hundred thousand dollars. That was a tidy amount. George was surprised. Henrietta had never mentioned it. But then maybe she never thought about such things.

He was anxious to see her but he had avoided her. Overnight, she had become a widow, and even though most people might guess she was not heartbroken, the respectful thing was to let her face her own sorrows, in her own way.

She came to the bank the third day, and George did have a few words with her, alone.

He lowered his voice. "I want to see you, Henrietta, as soon as possible."

She nodded. "Yes, but not now."

"Next week?"

"I want to wait until the insurance claim has been allowed. That might be two weeks."

"All right. I'll watch for the claim check."

She nodded, looked away, and smiled. She was in black. She looked very good in black.

A week passed, and another week. For several nights George was busy with Nettie Cawthorne, Roy Anderson, and her doctor, discussing the use of her trust fund for the needy children of Central Springs. Nettie looked very ill. George, really, was not very interested in her trust fund. He would not be around very long. But until he and Henrietta left, the smart thing to do was to live normally.

Then, Henrietta's insurance check came in. The same day she

came to the bank, and came up to the counter to see him.

"Your insurance check is here," he mentioned.

"Yes. Mr. Koch telephoned me."

She looked straight at him, then looked away, her expression impassive, saying nothing.

George lowered his voice. "I'll be up tonight."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, we have plans to

make. We were going to—"

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about," Henrietta said. "We have no plans to make. I do, but I certainly do not intend to include you."

He was shocked. He moistened his lips. "We—we were going away, you and I, together. We were—"

She turned back to face him and her eyes could not have been any colder. "I don't know what you are talking about, George. You and me together? Don't be silly!"

"You said—you said you loved me. Several times you declared . . ."

"Ridiculous! When?"

"That night your husband died. We were out together—"

"We certainly were not."

She sounded angry. George couldn't believe what she was saying. He made another desperate effort to reach the truth. He lowered his voice. "That night your husband died—do you know what happened?"

"Certainly I do," She snapped the words at him. "My husband came home late. He slipped and fell. If I thought anything else happened, I would certainly call in Roy Anderson and ask for an investigation. Do you understand me, George. Do you?"

He stared at her, but all he could read in her face was a total rejection of himself.

He leaned toward her. "Henrietta—"

She shook her head and her lips were thin and straight. "George, please don't be difficult. I will be leaving town, very soon. Alone. It would be nice to remember you as a good friend. Of course if I have to complain to the sheriff—"

George was silent. He said nothing more. But as Henrietta left the bank he was raging inside. He had been duped, beautifully. He had been used and then discarded. He had been made a fool, and he

knew no way of cleansing the torment inside himself.

Henrietta left the bank. Then she returned and went to see Mr. Koch, the president. She was there only a minute, and after that marched to the door without a glance at George.

A little while later, Mr. Koch sent for George. He was frowning, and he said, "George, you talked to Henrietta. Did she seem perfectly normal?"

"She was a little brusque," George said cautiously. "Of course, we never have any trouble. Sometimes—"

"Do you know what she wants?" Mr. Koch interrupted. "She wants to withdraw her money, in cash. Cash! Today! With the insurance, that's over a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. What does she want to do with it? Sit and look at it? Count it? I just can't understand it."

"Didn't she explain?"

"No, she just said she wanted it. Period."

George was silent, but he thought, *She wants to get away from me before I can do anything. She'll get into her car and take off. I'll never be able to guess where she went. She'll get her attorney to sell her house and her property, but she'll make him promise never to say where she is.* He might be wrong about this, he knew, but he could think of no other reason why she wanted her money in cash. If she changed her account through the normal processes, he could tell where she was. If she took the money in cash, she could vanish.

"I don't like this," Mr. Koch said. "It isn't safe to hold that much cash."

"You could say, at least, that the insurance check hasn't been cleared," George suggested.

"I suppose we could," Mr. Koch said. "But Henrietta will explode. The insurance check is good. Actually, there's no reason Henrietta can't have the money."

"Then you're going to give it to her."

"I'm going to use Roy Anderson as a messenger, have him deliver the money. Maybe, as sheriff, he can talk some sense into her. Don't talk about this, George."

George nodded, turned away, but he was thinking. He had been a fool. Henrietta did not love him. She had used him. And if she had used him, she owed him some kind of consideration. The hundred thousand dollars from the insurance company, for instance, was being made available because of a push at the top of the stairs. His push.

Toward closing time Roy Anderson came in with a black briefcase. He gave it to Mr. Koch, who took it and went back into the bank's vault, with one of the tellers.

While they were there, Anderson walked toward George. "I suppose you know about it," he said, and he was scowling. "A batty thing to do. I tried to talk to Henrietta, but she wouldn't listen to my warnings."

"A stubborn woman," George said.

"Too stubborn, but it's her money. If you're not too busy, I wish you would drop by and see Nettie Cawthorne. The doctor said today she had only a little more time."

"I'll try to see her," George said.

He said that automatically, almost without thought. It had occurred to him that he was probably the only person in town who had worked out a way to get to Henrietta's house, without much chance of being observed. It was through an orchard and along a hedge to Henrietta's back yard. She had used this with him, when they went driving. Both had been as careful as possible, not to be seen together.

He was smiling when Roy Anderson left the bank with the briefcase filled with Henrietta's money. He had the notion he would see that briefcase again—if Henrietta failed to leave town before dark. *I won't hurt her,* George thought. *But I want my share of the money I earned.* He was going to be very stubborn about it.

As soon as it was dark he started for Henrietta's, through the orchard, along the hedge, and into her back yard. He tried the back door. Amazingly, it was not locked. He opened it, stepped inside, and the moment he got there, someone clicked on the lights.

It was Henrietta. But of course it was. No one else was here. Just Henrietta, with a gun in her hand. She was not smiling. Her eyes were hard, glistening. Her lips were thin, straight. They hardly moved as she said, "Hello, George. I expected you. I think you would have come, anyhow, but I knew you would if I drew out my money. Did you think I was running away?"

He watched that gun in her hand. It was very steady. It was pointed straight at him. It was hard to say anything but he did manage a few words. "I—I thought we ought to talk things over."

She shook her head. "No, George. We have nothing to talk about."

"I—I helped you, with your husband. I mean—"

Her smile was not very pleasant.

"Yes, I know. I saw you push him down the stairs. I think I could have done it myself, but if anything had gone wrong—"

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "That gun, Henrietta. We don't need a gun."

"But I do," Henrietta said. "I want all the money, all of it. I have a very nice place for you—down in the basement. Of course you will be missed, but no one would ever think you came here. Never in the world."

George shook his head. This was impossible, unrealistic, but it was frightening, too. He had the shaky feeling that he would never get away from here. He would hear the gun, he would feel a sharp burst of pain, and that would be all. If Henrietta could fire the gun, she was tough enough to dig a grave in the basement. The one thing hard to understand was why she had not killed her husband, herself. Maybe it took special courage to kill a husband, or more likely, someone was available to be used, a man named George.

He said, "Henrietta—"

She smiled that tight smile, and said, "Good-by, George." And she leveled the gun at him and fired.

George heard a click, and another click, and another. It took him that long to realize the gun was not firing.

He dived forward, dived straight at Henrietta, carried her to the floor, reached for her throat. He heard a gasping scream. That was all. His fingers tightened, dug in, and held. For possibly a minute Henrietta struggled. After that she didn't, and in a little while, she was dead.

George stood up. He looked down at her figure thoughtfully. She was not very pretty, right now. In fact she had never been very pretty. He could do much better. In a way it was good she was gone. Now, if he could find her money—

He did find it, in her room in the black briefcase. Over a hundred and seventy thousand dollars, all for him. He would take it home, hide it for a time. Then in a few months he would leave town with it and never come back. The mystery of Henrietta's death might disturb a number of people, but no one would ever suspect George, good old George, safe, stodgy, unimaginative. He would have to play that role for a little while longer.

He spent half an hour, making sure he had left no fingerprints in Henrietta's house. Then he left. He was very careful, walking home, that he stayed in the shadows, and that no one saw him. He had several blocks to walk after he left the

orchard, but he took a side street. He was almost home when a car pulled over to the curb, and someone inside hailed him. "Hey, George! Wait a minute."

He pulled up, looked around. He was carrying a briefcase, the one he had taken from Henrietta's room, filled with her money, but then it was a normal thing for him to be carrying a briefcase. He often used one, to take work home from the bank. It should not be surprising he was carrying one tonight.

He raised his voice. "Yes? What is it?"

"I've been looking for you everywhere," said the voice from the car, Roy Anderson's voice. "Nettie Cawthorne is much worse. There's nothing much we can do for her, but I think we ought to be standing by at a time like this. If you're not too busy—"

"I'll just leave my things in the house," George said. "It won't take more than a minute or two."

He slanted toward his house, and for one terrible moment he was afraid that Roy Anderson would stop him. But no one called after him. He reached the house, went inside, and wondered where to hide the briefcase, quickly.

He had no chance to reach a decision. Even as he was wondering where to put the briefcase, Roy Anderson appeared in the doorway. He had followed him to the house, had come in without knocking, and there was a tight scowl on his face.

George tried to steady himself. "What is it, Roy?"

"You're carrying a briefcase," Roy Anderson said. "But you weren't at the bank. I know, because I went there some time ago and the bank is closed, dark."

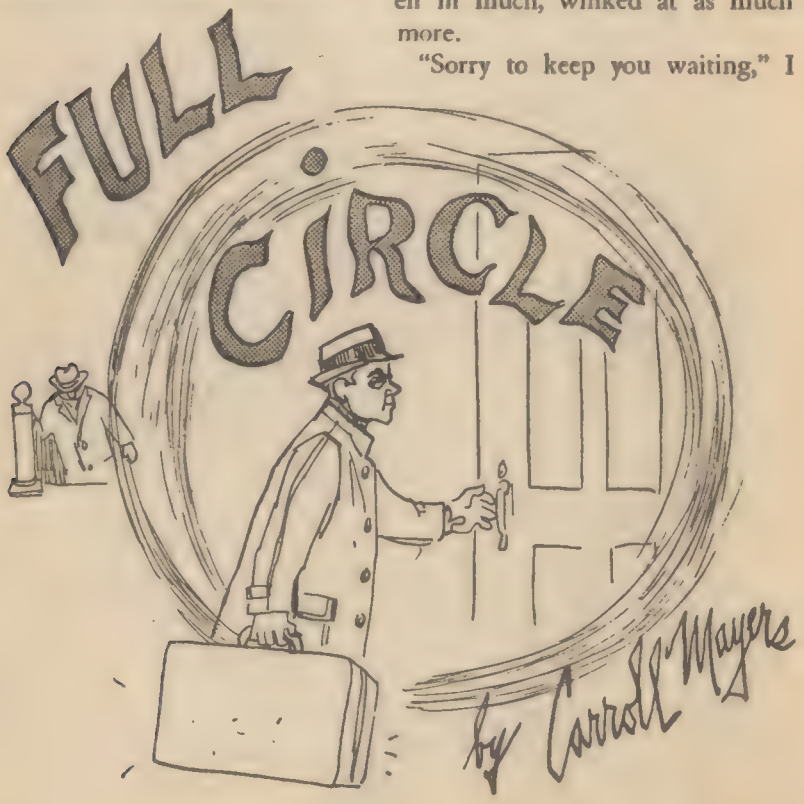
"I—I've been walking," George said.

"Maybe," Anderson said. "But let me look at that briefcase. It seems exactly like the one I delivered to Henrietta. If I'm wrong—"

He stepped forward, took the briefcase from George's hand, looked inside.

George was silent. What could he say that would be of any value? He shook his head, sadly. He should have stayed being George.

Should one think himself more clever than others, he might find it wise not to bypass the superstition of keeping his fingers crossed.



NICHOLS was slouched on a bench in the hall when I reached the apartment shortly before ten that night. With his sandy crewcut and ruddy complexion, the man typified a brash Ivy Leaguer rather than a private investigator. Only his forty-year-old eyes belied the Joe College prototype; shrewd and appraising, they had plainly taken in much, winked at as much more.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I

told him as we went inside and I stowed my sample case in the foyer closet, "but I got hung up in a traffic jam."

He nodded. "I thought it might be something like that, Mr. Hurley. You said you wanted the wrap-up tonight, so I hung around." He took several folded sheets from his pocket, handed them to me. "That's the whole week, just as you ordered," he said. "Times, places, the works."

I tossed the sheaf on a coffee table. "Give me the essentials."

He studied me closely. "You won't like it," he suggested.

"I was aware of that possibility when I hired you," I said. "Let's have it."

Nichols shrugged, took a few more seconds to fire a cigarette. "As you suspected, your wife's seeing another man."

I kept my expression wooden. "Who?"

"A fellow named Ehret." He inhaled deeply, watching me. "The man's an artist, has an apartment in the Village."

I swore. "An artist!"

"Maybe I should say, would-be painter," Nichols amended. "He's apparently new to the scene, really serious, doesn't mingle." A slow grin accompanied his words. "Whatever, he hits the full gamut: Vandyke, dark glasses, sloppy sweater, the whole Bohemian bit."

I said, "I can't believe Helen would be attracted to a man like that."

He waved the cigarette toward the coffee table. "It's all there, Mr. Hurley. Believe me, it's true."

I picked up the sheaf, scanned the pages hurriedly, threw them down again. "You've actually seen my wife with this—character?"

"I have," he told me. "As I said, he seems to be all Art, doesn't circulate much. But your wife's been meeting him nights at a neighborhood espresso house."

"And tonight?"

"I tailed her right to his apartment."

I drew a full breath. "She's still there?"

Nichols started to manufacture a knowing smile, thought better, held himself to another small shrug. "She was when I quit watching the place," he said. "I would've stayed on, but you said . . ."

I confirmed my wish for his assignment's finish. "You've done a good job," I added shortly. I crossed to a corner table, got out a .38 automatic and a checkbook. I asked, "Fifty a day, wasn't it?"

His gaze flicked to the table top, lingered on the gun. He stubbed his cigarette, his voice holding an uncertain edge when

he spoke again. "And expenses."

"Of course." I wore a gun rig under my right arm; I thrust the .38 into it, then filled out a check, handed it to Nichols. "That should cover everything," I said.

He pocketed the slip almost without looking at it. His shrewd eyes narrowed as they met mine. "What's with the gun?" he queried bluntly.

I smiled at him without humor. "As I said, your work's finished. Good night, Nichols."

He made no move to leave. Rather, his jaw set and the glint in his gaze turned challenging. "What about the gun?" he repeated.

I retained my smile. "That, I believe, is none of your concern."

He shook his head. "If you're thinking of blasting Ehret or your wife, maybe it is," he said thinly. "The police might not believe I didn't know about the idea when I ran them down for you."

I said, "If they don't, that's your problem."

His ruddy features darkened; he started to say more when I cut him short. "Forget it. You did a job and you've been paid. Now get out of here."

"Listen, Hurley—"

I stopped him again, this time by drawing the automatic, carelessly waving it in his direction. "That's all, Nichols. Now get out."

For a moment he hesitated, eyeing me stolidly, lips quirking. Then he turned, slammed out of the apartment.

I went back to the table, replaced the .38, took off the shoulder rig, then settled down with a sports magazine. I'd read for some thirty minutes when the apartment buzzer sounded.

My caller was a stocky individual with expressionless features but a pair of eyes as calculating as Nichols'. He regarded me for a moment, then gave a short nod. "Mr. David Hurley?"

"That's right."

He drew an ID card from his pocket. "Sergeant Reid, police headquarters," he informed me. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Of course." I motioned him inside, indicated a comfortable chair. "What's it all about, Sergeant?"

Reid declined to be seated; after a brief appraisal of the room, he brought his gaze back to me, said, "I've been sent here because of a complaint, Mr. Hurley."

I hiked one brow. "Complaint?"

"Yes. By one Harry Nichols."

I frowned at him. "You're losing me, Sergeant," I said.

He studied me, made his words a statement rather than a question. "You know the man."

I assented. "He's a private detective I engaged to do some work for me."

"And tonight, after he had brought you his report, you drew a gun, ordered him out of this apartment."

I shook my head. "I did nothing of the sort."

Reid said, "Nichols claims otherwise."

"Then the man's lying."

"Why should he lie, Hurley?"

I said shortly, "I don't know. Perhaps to make trouble for me because I refused to meet his demand for more pay than we'd agreed on."

"I see." He appeared to consider the possibility, abruptly asked, "What sort of work had Nichols done for you?"

I shook my head again. "That's a personal matter," I told him.

His tone hardened. "Not necessarily. Nichols informed headquarters you hired him to check on your wife's seeing another man, that when he gave you his report you put a gun on your person, refused to tell him your intention and then threatened him with the weapon." He paused. "Aside from menacing Nichols, the question of your primary intent with that gun makes it a police matter."

I sighed. "I told you, the man's lying. There wasn't any gun."

"What about your relationship with your wife?"

"No comment," I said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've a reservation on the midnight plane to Denver."

Sergeant Reid watched me intently. "What's your business, Hurley?" he asked.

"I'm a courier for a diamond merchants' association," I told him. "I'm flying a consignment to Denver tonight if," and my sarcasm was thinly veiled, "I can get the necessary clearance."

He wasn't disturbed by my tone but moved to leave. At the door he turned, shot me a final sharp glance. "No gun?"

"No gun, Sergeant."

I opened the door for him. Alone once more, I waited ten minutes, then retrieved from the closet the sample case with the most valuable consignment I'd ever handled, $100,000 worth of near-perfect stones, and left the apartment.

I had parked my car on the street and as I swung into traffic, drove slowly across town, I noted with satisfaction the pair of headlights which followed me, matching my every turn.

The apartment I sought was in an ancient brownstone in the heart of the Village. I left my car at the curb, climbed the building's scarred front steps and the

pungent interior stairway with unhurried deliberation, sample case tucked under my arm.

Reaching the third floor, I moved slowly down the dingy hall. I was standing before the door of the end apartment when a footfall echoed behind me. I turned to again face Sergeant Reid.

"I thought you had a plane to catch?" The sergeant's query was taut.

I indicated annoyance. "I have time," I said. "I'm taking care of a personal matter first."

His lips thinned. "I think not."

I swung back to the door. "Stay out of this," I ordered him curtly. "This is not your affair."

Reid caught my shoulder, pulled me around, pinned me against the wall while he went over me for a gun. Finding none, his mouth pinched tighter but he wasn't dissuaded. "I'm making it my affair," he said. "I figure you lied, that's why I followed you. You're not assaulting anybody—"

I jerked free. "No man makes a play for my wife," I said with heat. As I spoke, I thrust against the apartment door, wrenching the knob. The latch was off; the door opened and I stormed inside.

The apartment lights were on. No one was in the livingroom, but a partially closed door masked an adjoining room. I started for that room.

"Hold it, Hurley—"

I ignored him, lurched across the threshold. The neatly-swung sap caught me flush behind the left ear. My skull exploded in myriad pinwheels; I dropped the sample case, fell forward into a bottomless well, faintly hearing the heavy thud of the door being slammed shut and bolted. Then blackness . . .

The return to consciousness was a painful trip. When I finally made it, shaking my head gingerly and perching uncertainly on the edge of the bed, I found Sergeant Reid regarding me somberly and my wife, Helen, slumped in a chair across the room, staring vacantly at the floor. She studiously avoided looking at me.

Reid asked, "How much was it worth, Hurley?"

I blinked at him. "Eh?"

"The diamond consignment you were taking to Denver."

I said, "About a hundred thousand—" and then I stopped, looked hastily about the room. My sample case was missing.

The sergeant's gaze was bleak as he watched me. "That's right," he said, indicating the room's open window which admitted to a fire escape. "They went that way—the

diamonds *and* Ehret, gone . . ."

I felt my throbbing head. "You mean . . .?"

"Your wife has told me enough to piece it together," Reid said. "Artist or whatever, Ehret had you tabbed for a windfall. He played up to your wife, welcoming your suspicions and the private operator you hired because they both fitted in with his plan. He waited until tonight, when he'd learned you would be carrying a small fortune, then invited your wife here, confident you'd learn of the tryst through Nichols and would react as you did. When you showed, he threatened your wife against crying out, slugged you when you barged in, then grabbed your diamond case and skipped."

The sergeant jerked a thumb at the splintered door lock. "He couldn't have expected me to be with you," he finished, "but slamming and locking the door gave him time to make it."

I threw a hard look at my wife. "Nice," I said. "Very nice."

Helen bit her lip, still averting her gaze. "I—I've been a fool, Dave. I don't know what to say."

The sergeant wanted no part of any marital recriminations. He used the excuse of steadying me as I moved from the bed to head off any further exchange. "You all right?"

"I'll make it," I said gloomily.

He nodded. "I wouldn't worry too much about that consignment. It'll be too hot for a quick turnover. I think there's a good chance we'll nab Ehret fast."

I gave Helen another grim glance. "Get started on it, Sergeant," I said bluntly. Then I strode out of the apartment.

I was sitting stiffly behind the wheel of my car when Reid and Helen reached the street after me. The sergeant brought her across, handed her into the car. Still conscious of the cold awkwardness of the moment, he had only a brief parting comment. "Both of you will have to come to headquarters tomorrow for a statement. Take care of that head, Hurley." Then he went to his own vehicle and drove off.

Helen waited until the tail lights of Reid's car winked around a corner before she turned to me anxiously. "I—I didn't really hurt you, Dave?"

I grinned at her. "You swing a wicked sap, hon, but it was worth it. We couldn't risk faking it." I fingered my skull again. "For a hundred grand I'll suffer a hundred headaches," I said. "You shoved the case under the mattress?"

She nodded. "Do we get it back tonight?"

"No," I said. "One of the tenants may have heard the ruckus,

might see me go back. There's no rush; the pad's paid for until the end of the month."

Helen flashed a tiny grin of her own. "At which time the police still will be looking for Ehret."

"The police and my association's own investigators," I smiled. Then I sobered. "We still haven't carried it off," I reminded Helen. "Tomorrow's statement will be only the beginning. There will be plenty of hard questioning. You'll have to keep your head."

Her assurance was quick. "I will, Dave; you'll see." Then she added, "Do you have to move out tonight?"

I started the motor. "As an embittered husband, I would likely go to a hotel," I told her. "The sergeant's a trained cop; he would wonder if I didn't." I headed for our apartment. "We'll only be apart a week or so," I went on. "Just until the first hue and cry dies down. Then you can skip to Mexico with the stones. I'll quit my job, join you. We'll have it made the rest of our lives."

Helen squeezed my arm in blissful anticipation. I was feeling a warm glow myself. A tidy little fortune in diamonds, all tax free.

I'd just finished packing a bag for the hotel when the phone rang. Answering, I stiffened as a familiar voice murmured, "Clever play, Hurley; set me up for a complaint to the police with that gun bit, then arouse the sergeant's doubts so he'd follow you, be right on the scene to give official credence to the heist."

My breath caught. I said, "What are you talking about, Nichols?"

"This week's masquerade," he said. "The false beard and dark glasses buildup for the heister who wasn't there. You had me fooled too, until I remembered you'd handled that gun, signed that check with your left hand. 'Ehret' was also a southpaw. I got to wondering about that coincidence. I tailed the sergeant when he followed you, hung around outside, I'm not sure just what sort of caper you pulled or how you staged it, but considering that association you work for I can guess."

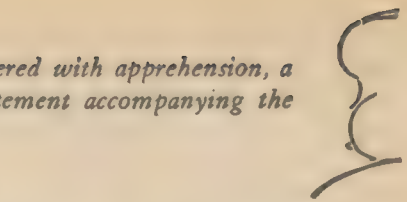
My heart was thudding against my ribs. I blurted, "You're talking nonsense!"

His laugh was confident. "You know I'm not, Hurley. But don't panic. I don't want it all. Just fifty per cent—or I blow the whistle."

"No!" I said. "You can't prove a thing!" My voice broke as I slammed down the receiver.

Helen was staring at me, wide-eyed. "Dave, what is it?" But the shrewd operator wasn't bluffing and I knew it. Nichols could prove it all.

Although many a night call is answered with apprehension, a certain element appreciates the excitement accompanying the unknown.



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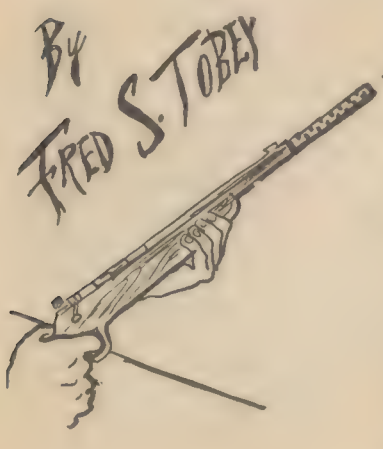
FRED S. TOBEY



JOHNNY COCOA woke quickly at the sound of the telephone. Groping on the night table he found the lamp, snapped it on, and squinting in the sudden light, he looked at the clock. Four-ten. He lifted the phone.

"Yeah?" he said.

The answering feminine voice was controlled but urgent.

"This is the switchboard," it said. "Please remain calm but act quickly. There is a fire in your wing of the hotel. All guests are advised to leave by their nearest fire exit. Put on shoes and a coat or robe and leave without delay. You will find your fire exit marked in red on a diagram on the door of your room. Act quickly. I do not have time to answer questions." There was a click as the connection was broken.

For one awful moment after he dropped the phone back into its

cradle, Johnny lay in a state of paralysis, propped on one elbow. In Johnny's life mortal risks were to be taken in stride, but not this one; his great fear had always been that one day he would be trapped high in a burning building. Now that the moment was upon him, his mind tried to reject it. This could not be reality. Yet wasn't there already an odor of smoke? Was it coming through the open window, or could it be seeping in around the door on the far side of the room? Johnny's stomach convulsed as he pictured the corridor outside the door swirling with smoke and heat.

His first instinct, when he was able to move, was to run to the window and peer out, even though he knew quite well what he would see; the rubble of a vacant lot ten floors below, with nothing in between but the stifling air of the midsummer night. Johnny's feet already were on the floor when the mental watchdog that monitored every action of his life awoke sufficiently to make him pause, despite his panic.

Something doesn't quite figure, Johnny, said the watchdog. *Risk ten seconds to call the operator back before you start running.*

He reached for the phone and picked it up just as it started ringing again.

"Say, look—" he began, but an excited voice overrode him.

"This is the switchboard," it said, speaking rapidly. "There is a fire in your wing of the hotel. Put on shoes and a coat—"

"You told me, you told me!" Johnny cried. "What I want to—"

"You mean the other operator called this floor?" The girl seemed close to hysteria. "O.K., just get out fast. It's getting worse, and—"

That did it. Johnny reached into the closet beside the bed and grabbed for his trench coat.

On the window sill of a cold water flat on the side of the small vacant lot, a silenced rifle moved into line with the window of Johnny's room as the light from his bedside lamp suddenly identified it among the others on the dark

wall of the building. The man crouching behind the gun kept his eyes on the latticed rectangle of light while he shared a telephone with a woman close behind him. Suddenly a figure appeared at the hotel room window, silhouetted against the louvres of the partially-opened venetian blind. The watchers tensed.

"You goin' to wait till he lifts the blind?" the woman whispered.

"Can't. He might not," said the man.

In rapid succession but with great precision, he fired twice. A small sound of glass followed the muffled noise of the shots. The venetian blind shimmered for a second and was still again. Without an outcry, the form behind it dropped from sight.

The man with the rifle drew back into the blackness of the cold water flat. He stood up and let out a long breath. He was shaking now. Very quietly, he closed the window. The woman pressed against him and together they stared at the lone lighted window across the vacant lot.

"I can't believe it," she whispered. "You sure you got him?"

"Twice," said the man. "He's done, kid."

"We leaving now?"

"In a few minutes. Stay quiet."

"You think somebody heard?"

"Who wants to get involved, this time of night? But if anybody woke up, we'll give 'em time to get back to sleep."

"Paul, you know what? At the last minute I thought, 'This is nutty. Nobody can put Johnny Coca on the spot this easy.' "

"Like I said, kid, everybody's got his weakness. I been hearin' for years from Johnny how scared he was of gettin' trapped in a fire in some hotel. This old flea bag scared him worse than most, too. I never could figure why he didn't stay somewhere else when he was in town."

"How'd you know he'd go to the window?"

"Anybody would, first thing. Wouldn't you?"

"I guess so. Yes, I guess I would."

"Your telephone act was swell, kid. Especially the way you were panicky the second time, and the different voice you used."

"That was a cinch. It was you that was smart, Paul, making the two calls that way to catch him if he tried to get the operator back. And you putting in the calls instead of me, too."

"Yeah, well, a girl calling this time of night, the hotel operator might get nosey and listen in."

"How did you ever think of this way to put him on the spot, Paul?"

"Well, you know Johnny called me up to his room when he got in town. I was looking out the window there, saw this place across the lot, and all of a sudden I thought of it."

"You're the greatest, Paul. And you won't have to worry any more about the squeeze Johnny was putting on you."

"That's right, kid. Things will sure be different."

In the lighted room across the vacant lot, Johnny Coca looked ruefully at the two bullet holes in his trench coat, shoulder high.

"Could have got a finger," he muttered, noting the splintered wood of the hanger on which he had held the coat out in front of the window. He put the coat in the closet, lay down on the bed, picked up the phone and waited.

Presently there was the click of a switchboard connection, and a voice spoke softly.

"Johnny?"

"Who else, in this room, baby?"

There was a hushed giggle.

"Me," the operator whispered, "I hope. Say, who was the guy that just called you a couple of times?"

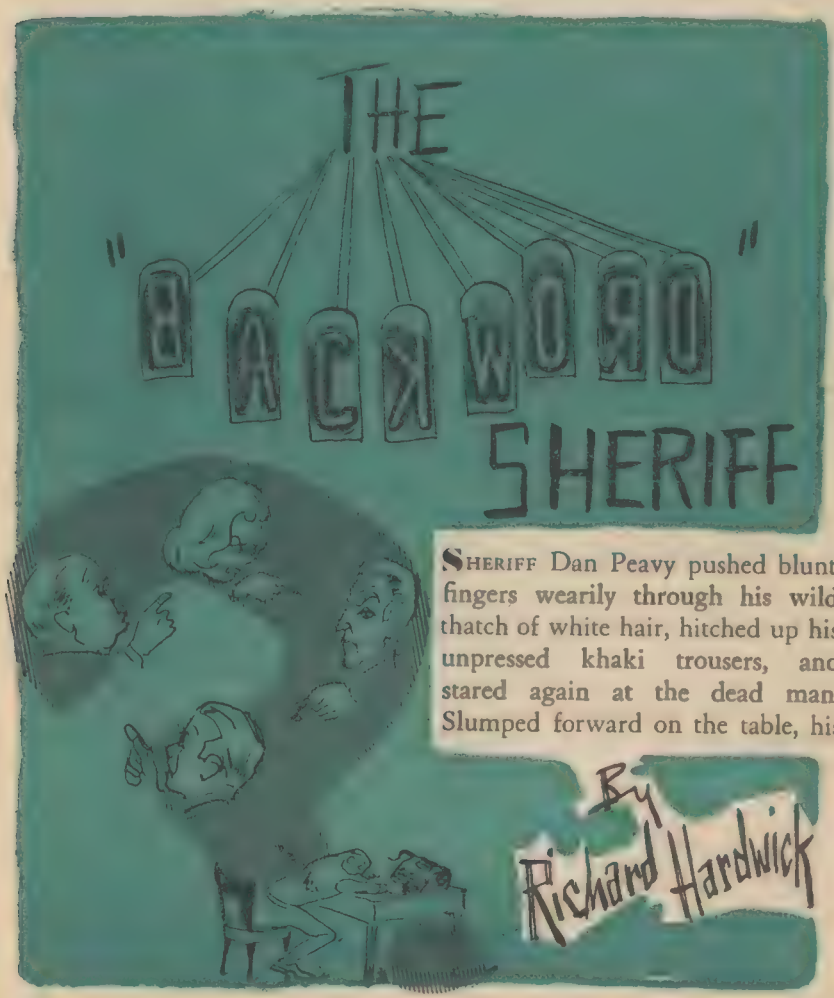
"*Guy?* . . . Oh, that guy. Just an old pal, baby."

"What a nut, calling this time of night. I would have listened only you told me what you'd do to me if I ever did."

"That's right, baby, you better remember. You coming up to say hello?"

"*John-ny*!" The voice sank to an intimate whisper again. "You *know* I can't tonight. I *told* you the other girl is sick. I wasn't kidding, Johnny. I'm all alone on the board."

As one has learned to expect, Sheriff Dan Peavy solves this in his inimitable manner, somewhat as an oarsman rows in one direction while looking in another.



SHERIFF Dan Peavy pushed blunt fingers wearily through his wild thatch of white hair, hitched up his unpressed khaki trousers, and stared again at the dead man. Slumped forward on the table, his

By Richard Hardwick

head resting with the right cheek against the left forearm, the dead man stared back. The reason for his condition was apparently the knife which protruded from between his shoulder blades.

Dan lifted his gaze balefully to the four persons who waited impatiently for him to get on with it. "Alright now," he drawled. "Who was it found him?"

Mr. Duvall Pratt, a blustery, fat individual who had been growing progressively irritable since Deputy Jerry Sealey and yours truly, Pete Miller, answered the call half an hour earlier, gave a tremulous sigh. "Sheriff, we have told all that to your deputies! Is it absolutely—"

Dan Peavy nodded vaguely. "But I wasn't here, so tell me."

Pratt's cheeks gave a little gelatin-like tremble. "We *all* found him! We came down here to Findlay's cabin for our regular ten a.m. conference and found him exactly as you see him now. Naturally, we left everything exactly as it was and had the manager at the inn call your office at once."

"Naturally," Dan murmured. He looked around at the table. 'Everything', as referred to by the fat man, consisted of the corpse, the table, and a portable typewriter a foot or so to the right of the body, with several keys jammed against the empty roller, where the departed seemed to have struck it when he pitched forward.

"This regular ten o'clock meetin'," Dan said. "What's that all about? This some kind of business trip you folks were on?"

"We are here in your lovely county purely by accident, let me assure you!" Pratt said. "Carlton Findlay—" he bowed respectfully toward the dead man "—and we four were en route to Miami in our company plane. Some sort of malfunction developed in one engine and we prudently put down at your local airport. Carlton has been a pilot for years and the decision was his. Repairs were necessary and certain parts had to be ordered, so we rented these five beach cabins at the Guale Inn. Unfortunately, there was some mix-up on the airplane parts and we have now been here for two days."

Dan said, "Hmmmm," and gave his bulbous nose a tentative pull. "Now then," he said to the fat man, "the victim here is Mr. Findlay, and you say your name is Pratt, and you're the vice president of this here . . ." He glanced over at Jerry's notepad and attempted to decipher the jottings thereon.

"Interstate Land Development Company," Jerry whispered.

The fat man rolled his eyes in complete exasperation. "That is correct, Sheriff! And this—" he

indicated the lone female of the group "—is Miss Mitzi Block. She was Findlay's secretary."

And, I noted, taking mental inventory of a neatly curved figure, large blue eyes, and honey-blond hair, a very nice dish, indeed.

Pratt made a gesture toward the tall, saturnine fellow who had been standing near the front window gazing out at the ocean. "Col. Barrington, sales director of I.L.-D.C." The colonel acknowledged with a silent click of the heels of his sneakers, and a virtually imperceptible bow.

Almost as though it were an afterthought, the fat man indicated the final member of the group, a rodential young man who sat glumly astraddle a straight chair, his arms folded across the back, and stared at the corpse. "This is Edwin McChesney, Findlay's nephew." I judged him to be somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty, which put him roughly in the same age bracket as Miss Mitzi Block, and perhaps some twenty years the junior of Pratt, Col. Barrington, and possibly the late Carlton Findlay.

McChesney looked around at the mention of his name. "I'm in the promotional end of the game, Sheriff," he said, to which Pratt immediately made a snorting sound and turned away.

McChesney bristled. "And just what was that supposed to convey?" he demanded. He darted a suspicious glance at the others, then nodded slowly as his eyebrows rose and his lips pursed into a neatly puckered little 'o'. "So . . . *that's* it! Pin the tail on Edwin, eh? Because he happened to be my uncle!"

Pratt favored Dan Peavy with a pained smile, then spoke to McChesney. "You can only do yourself harm, Edwin, by trying to keep certain—ah—facts from the sheriff. I'm sure you realize it was no secret that Carlton informed you quite recently he had bailed you out on your stupid gambling debts for the last time. Now, abruptly, you stand to come into a sizeable inheritance." He shrugged at the unavoidable implication.

"There's a term for it," McChesney hastened to say in his defense. "Good fortune."

The colonel spoke for the first time. "Or murder?"

McChesney's nose began to twitch violently. He spluttered ineffectually for several moments, then aimed a shaking finger at Pratt. "Alright—al*right!* I would have kept my mouth shut. Now then, let's get all the bloody cards on the table! You, Pratt, are you going to have the temerity to try denying that you and Uncle Carl-

ton have been fighting tooth and nail over how to run this blasted company for the past two years? You hated his guts, and now, abruptly, as you yourself so aptly put it, you are right in line for the top job! You don't have the thorn in your side, you can run things as you damned well see fit!"

The fat man seemed to be puffing up. "See here, Edwin! See *here*—"

But McChesney was not finished in his battle to come out of the corner. He spun around and re-aimed the finger at Miss Mitzi Block. "And you, dear sweet Mitzi, you've been sitting back looking for revenge ever since you landed this job! Oh, Uncle Carlton knew all about you, even if you didn't think he did! In fact, all of us knew—me, Pratt, the colonel—how Uncle Carlton backed your father against the wall a couple of years ago in that Atlanta deal. When the pressure got too great your old man shot himself. That's business, but not to you it wasn't. What would be your word for it?"

"*Murder!*" she snapped, obviously without thinking. Her big blue eyes became saucers, then blinked at the realization of what was happening.

"Is this the truth, ma'am?" Dan Peavy inquired in his gentlest tone.

Her lips tightened, and if looks were lethal, McChesney would have been reunited with his uncle on the spot. "Alright, it is true! I worked hard to get this job, and every day since I've had it I've worked even harder trying to find something that I could use against Carlton Findlay. But I wanted *legal* revenge. I wanted to see him in prison!" She glanced haltingly at the corpse. "I . . . I didn't do . . . *that!*"

"You'll have to grant there is a motive, Mitzi," the colonel reminded her.

"Very well, Col. Barrington, I'll grant there may be a motive!" she came back hotly. "And while we're on the subject of motives, I've learned quite a few things by keeping my eyes and ears open on this job. Let's take you, for instance. What about your abortive attempt at swindling? Did you think I wouldn't know all about how you took options on that tract outside Tampa under a fake name and

then tried to turn a whopping profit by selling to Interstate Land Development? But your inside information backfired, didn't it? Regardless of what else Carlton Findlay may have been, no one would deny that he was a very smart man. He found out about your little plan, and he told you he was going to leave you holding the bag—"

"You've no proof of these absurd allegations!" the colonel snapped crisply. He smoothed one side of his mustache with a nervous motion. "No proof at all!"

It had all happened so quickly, there was an unexpected and decidedly uncomfortable moment of silence, as if the dead man was the only one remaining to have his say.

But, of course, it was not Carlton Findlay who spoke. It was Dan Peavy. "Now, gettin' back to the murder. You all say you came down here at ten o'clock. Did anybody see him before that this morning? I mean, anybody who wants to admit it? It's right plain that *somebody* saw him."

"The last I saw of Uncle Carlton was at dinner last night," said McChesney. "All of us had dinner together at the Inn."

"I spoke to him this morning," Miss Mitzi Block said, and added hastily, "on the telephone, that is. I believe it must have been ten minutes or so before ten o'clock."

Jerry flipped the pages of his notepad. "That's right, Dan. Switchboard girl at the Inn says Findlay rang Miss Block's cabin at about ten minutes to ten, talked a half a minute or so, then rang Pratt's cabin." He closed his notes and gave the young woman a reassuring smile.

"There were certain papers he wanted me to bring to the meeting," she said, by way of explanation.

The fat man nodded. "The same reason he phoned me."

"Your cabin's the one next to this one?" asked Dan.

"No . . ." Pratt said hurriedly. "Mine's the *last* one of the five we rented!"

Jerry had his ubiquitous notepad out again, showing a sketch to the sheriff. "This one's at the south end, and going north there's Miss Block's, Col. Barrington's, Mr. McChesney's—"

"And *mine*!" Pratt said happily.

"But anybody could have come down here from any one of the other cabins and had a mighty good chance of not being seen," I injected. "There are thick stands of sea myrtle between all these cabins, as well as between them and the road."

"So," McChesney smirked, "Duvall Pratt could just as easily have

come down here and stabbed Uncle Carlton as anyone else!"

He bent his head, still grinning. "Maybe easier, thinking you gentlemen would figure it was too unlikely."

The questioning went on a while longer, with no visible results. Dan allowed all of them to go back to their respective cabins for the time being, with strict instructions to stay put.

"Well, Dan," Jerry said when the group had gone. "Whatd'ya make of it?"

We were standing in the backyard of Findlay's cabin, and Dan rubbed his chin and gave his head a slow shake. "You're right about this dang underbrush, Pete. An elephant coulda come down here an likely done it without a soul seein' him."

"The killer had another thing running in his favor," I said. "Findlay was expecting all of 'em for the ten o'clock meeting, so whoever did it could have gone into the cabin and got right up to Findlay without arousing any suspicion." Jerry nodded his concurrence. "Then he sneaked back to his own place and strolled back here with the others a few minutes later."

Dan Peavy gave his nose a particularly thoughtful twist, a gesture which in some unknown manner seemed to aid the flow of his mental processes. "Kinda funny . . ."

Jerry frowned. "Funny?"

"Yeah. All of these folks have got some kind of motive and not one of 'em's got an alibi. It looks to me like that's just the thing the killer was bankin' on. He knew he couldn't hide his reason for wanting Findlay dead, at least not for long, but he knew the others wouldn't be able to hide theirs either." Dan scratched his head. "Which leaves us up the creek, like they say."

Just about then the ambulance from Faircloth's Funeral Parlor came in the winding sand drive. When it pulled to a stop our venerable coroner and medical examiner, Doc Stebbins, dismounted and ambled toward us.

I finished taking all the necessary pictures, Jerry marked the position of the body, and the ambulance boys carted the mortal coil of the late Carlton Findlay away.

"That knife hit him in or dang close to the heart," Doc was saying in answer to Dan Peavy's query. "I can let you know exactly after the autopsy."

"How quick do you reckon that killed him?"

Doc's bushy eyebrows went up. "Pretty quick, I can tell you."

"What I mean is, how quick? A

couple o' seconds? Half a minute?"

Doc Stebbins shrugged. "Well, a man with a heart wound could live for a few minutes. No way to tell about a particular case unless you're there with a watch. It ain't instan*tan*eous, if that's what you're tryin' to make me say." He shuffled toward the door and the waiting ambulance. "But with a knife planted like that in him, a man's a sure goner, so what's a half a minute one way or the other?"

We walked outside with him. "Could be a helluva lot," Dan Peavy mused, squinting against the sun. "Yes, sir, could be one helluva lot—to the guy that's been stabbed."

The ambulance backed out the narrow drive toward the road. Jerry turned to me. "I was just thinkin', Pete. Suppose they was all in on it! Ain't a one of 'em sorry Findlay's dead. Could be they got together and hatched up this whole thing."

I shook my head. "I can't buy that at all. That's no act they're putting on, throwing all those accusations around. How about it, Dan, what do you think?"

We both turned and saw that our boss had gone back into the cabin. A couple of seconds later he poked his head out the door. "Jerry! Run get all them folks back here! Got something I wanta show them!"

The four suspects were assembled in Findlay's cabin while Dan Peavy briefly went over the things we had been discussing. "So it looks this way," he summed up. "Everyone of you has got a motive, none of you has got an alibi for the time just before ten o'clock when Mr. Findlay was stabbed."

"And just where does that leave you, Sheriff?" Duvall Pratt asked with undisguised disdain. "Personally, I say call in the FBI or the state police, somebody competent! With all due respect, sir, this is not a case for some—some backwoods sheriff!"

Dan Peavy favored the fat man with a self-effacing grin. "You may be right, Mr. Pratt. But first, just hear me out. Shouldn't take but a minute or two."

"Hear what the man has to say," McChesney said. "What have we got to lose?"

"Now, like I said," Dan continued, "the killer was dependin' on this very thing, that we wouldn't be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. But from what's come out, Mr. Findlay himself knew each one o' you had some reason for wantin' him dead. And from what I gather, he was also a pretty smart man." They all nod-

ded agreement to that and Dan forged on. "So when one o' you walked in here a little before ten o'clock and stabbed him, I think Mr. Findlay knew right away what the killer was plannin'; and sprawled there on the table with maybe just a few seconds left on this earth, he knew the killer would most likely get away with it for that very reason."

"Granted that he must have seen his killer, Sheriff. There would have been no need in sneaking in here to do the job, since he was expecting all of us shortly." McChesney turned and gave a broad wink to the others. "What do you propose we do now? Run down to the morgue and have a little tête à tête with Uncle Carlton?"

"It would be mighty handy if we could do that," Dan replied, unruffled. "But things bein' as they are, I don't think it would be necessary." He walked slowly across the room and stopped at the table, where he sat down and reached for the typewriter. "Jerry, get out that notebook of yours and take down what I say. The rest o' you come here so's you can witness what I'm doin'."

With that, he gently plucked back the outermost of the jammed typewriter keys, holding the others so they would not fall back. "That was the 'B'," he said. He eased the next one loose. "'L'." The next. "'O'." Then he glanced around at the puzzled faces and let the final key flip back into position. "'C'."

Pratt, incredulous, stammered, "You—you think Findlay struck those keys *purposely*?"

Edwin McChesney was already on his tiptoes, straining to peer over Jerry's shoulder at the notepad. "B—L—O—C—" He moistened his lips and swallowed. "Bloc . . . *Block!* It's . . . it's Mitzi!"

"The poor devil must not have had the strength to strike the K!" Col. Barrington said, hopping on the bandwagon as it gathered speed. "Too much to blame on chance, though! One in ten million!"

McChesney voiced agreement. "No jury on earth would deny a dying man's last statement! He's put the finger right on his murderer! Justice, if I ever saw it!"

The young woman stood as if struck dumb. "I . . . he *couldn't* have . . ."

"Plain as the nose on your face!" exclaimed Duvall Pratt. The girl cowered as they all seemed to close in about her.

"Hold on there," drawled Dan Peavy. "Hold everything."

"You're the one who figured it out!" snapped the fat man. "Just because she's an attractive woman,

don't try to make excuses for her."

"Can't deny she's a mighty pretty girl, but that ain't what I wanta point out. When I unstuck them keys, I took the outside one first and the inside one last. Just backwards from the way Findlay hit 'em. Now, dyin' like he was, how come he'd go to all the trouble of figurin' it out backwards?"

"Backwards—?" somebody murmured, and six heads craned around to peer at Jerry's notepad. I read aloud, from right to left, "C—O—L—B—Colb?"

"Colby?" Jerry suggested weakly. "Anybody know a *Colby*?"

"Nobody here by that name—" I started, and then it struck me like a little tap from a hammer. "C—O—L—*period* B!"

"Col. Barrington . . ." murmured Miss Mitzi Block as she sank weakly onto a chair. "Col. Barrington . . ."

The colonel was halfway through the back door at full gallop when Jerry and I brought him down with a pair of flying tackles.

Sheriff Dan Peavy, of course, was really no different than he had been a couple of hours earlier, baggy khaki uniform, snow-white hair that cried out for both cutting and combing, a face like the windward side of Stone Mountain. But there was precious little reference to 'backwoods sheriffs', and there was a definite look of respect in the eyes of Pratt and McChesney. I might add that Miss Mitzi Block gazed on him in a manner that might have given some downright ungentlemanly ideas to a lesser man.

Like me, for instance.

Dear Fans:

Here are the particulars about the Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club:

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Most sincerely,
Pat Hitchcock

P.O. Box 5425
Sherman Oaks, California

Apropos the following, one might bear in mind that ESP has been elevated to the sphere of scientific investigation.

MARIAN stopped to marvel as usual at the sign in front of the luncheonette, "Ye Olde Tea Shoppe." Such a name would have been considered merely corny back in Westchester, but here, in Bear Creek, Alaska, it was downright ridiculous.

She caught sight of her reflection in the shop window and grinned ruefully. That was pretty ridiculous too. "You look like an Eskimo," she told herself wryly, but then felt contrite, remembering how pleased Don had been when he had brought home the white fur jacket and parka for her. "Back East you would have to wait many a year for a real fur coat. In this fabulous land you can have one right away," he had chortled. He had looked so happy she'd not had the heart to remind him there was no comparison between

a mink coat in Westchester and a rabbit-skin jacket in Bear Creek.

Since Ye Old Tea Shoppe was the only beanery in Bear Creek, or for that matter, within fifty miles, she pushed the door open and walked in. She would order some hot tea before starting that cold ride back in the jeep. And maybe, just maybe, it would be one of the days when Lucinda, the fortune teller, was in. "A gypsy fortune teller in Alaska?" she had said incredulously to Don when they had first moved here.

But he had just laughed. "Why not? There are all sorts of amazing things here." And his voice had that giddy lilt to it, like the voice of a man newly, breathtakingly, in love.

And that's what he was, Marian thought, resignedly, as she settled herself at the dirty table and ordered tea from the old woman that ran the place. Helplessly, hopelessly in love with this wild barren country, and the worst of it was that their ten-year-old son, Bobby, was equally smitten.

It had all started so simply. Don had been assigned to do an article on Alaska. They were to be there only a couple of months while he gathered material. But the couple of months had dragged on, and when she finally questioned him he admitted shamelessly that the article had been finished long ago. "I've been thinking, though, honey. This would be as good a time as any to get to work on my novel. We have enough in the bank to carry us for a year. I think this would be the perfect time and spot for it, what do you say?"

Say? What could she say? She and Don had often discussed "his novel" and had looked forward to the day when he would knock off from the rat-race and finally do it, but always in her daydreams the place where he would write it had a much more romantic setting. Acapulco, or Majorca, perhaps. Not this cold, cruel country. For to Marian there was no beauty here, only loneliness and cold and the sound of wolves howling in the night.

Their cabin was not in the settlement itself and this gave Marian a good argument against staying. "What of Bobby?" she had demanded. "He has to go to school."

But Don had an easy answer to that. "There's one in Bear Creek."

"Why, Don, that's only a one-room schoolhouse, and it's way too far for him to walk . . ."

"One year in a small school won't hurt him, and we can get a sled and a couple of dogs. I don't think he'll mind."

Mind? Ask any ten-year-old boy if he'd like to go to school by dog-

sled for a year and see what he says.

From that time on Marian's protests had been drowned by the strident pleas of her son and the only slightly less vocal pressure of her husband. And since she loved them both, she gave in. But for her it was a case of marking time; for them it was Life with a capital L. For them it was hunting, trapping, fishing, camping, all the rugged masculine things that modern life withholds from most men and their sons. Marian stirred her tea deliberately. She was happy for them, really, but now, thankfully, only three more months.

The curtains in the back of the shop stirred, and a bent swarthy woman stepped out.

"Oh, Lucinda, I'm so glad you're here," Marian called out. "Will you give me a reading when I'm through?"

The old woman nodded and lifted her purple lip in what was apparently meant to be a smile. It sometimes bothered Marian to realize how much she looked forward to these readings. Back East she had scoffed at fortune tellers, but here— She shook her head impatiently. No need to fret that she was losing her marbles—it was just that, what else could she do for entertainment—go out and kick a wolf?

I'm probably just subconsciously hoping that one day Lucinda is going to say she sees a great silver bird in the sky carrying me back to civilization, Marian chided herself.

Her tea finished, she walked over to the dark corner where Lucinda was sitting, a greasy-looking crystal ball in front of her on the table. *Crystal, my eye! It's probably plastic,* Marian scoffed inwardly as she sat down, but then found herself gripping the table edge, waiting impatiently for the gypsy to begin.

Lucinda was not one to be hurried and she stared intently into the globe for several minutes before beginning to speak in her halting, broken English, "Is hard to see—much hard . . ."

Resignedly Marian pulled out her wallet. She was inured to Lucinda's difficulty in seeing until some cold hard cash had been put on the table. She pulled out a fifty-cent piece and placed it near the crystal ball. But Lucinda, for once, seemed not to notice the coin. She was still staring intently into the ball. "I see a strange thing—it is a dog. No, it is . . ." She paused to rub the hem of her grimy dress over the ball. "No, it is not a dog —it is a wolf! Yes, a large grey wolf, and there are trees and snow —much snow all around . . ."

Marian felt strangely cheated. "Well, you've got the locale, all right," she said drily. "I wish just once you'd see a few palm trees in my future, though. For that matter, I'd settle for the inside of an automat."

The gypsy looked at her reprovingly. "Missus jokes. She does not believe in Lucinda's powers."

"Oh, no, no. I *do* believe. Really, I do," Marian said hastily. And to herself she sternly admonished, *Don't knock the local talent. Remember, it's all you have in the way of kicks for the next three months.*

Lucinda was staring again at the ball, a strange look on her face. Then she glanced up at Marian with an expression of—what? Compassion? Pity? Marian felt her throat go tight. "Why are you looking at me like that? Tell me." Even in her own ears she could detect, but not control, the rising note of fear. "Tell me what you see."

Lucinda looked uneasy. "No, no, Missus. It is nothing, what I see."

"What do you mean, nothing? Obviously you see something and I insist that you tell me. Here." Marian threw a dollar on the table. "I insist, do you hear?"

Lucinda looked agonized. "Please, Missus, it is only that near the great grey wolf I see a coat lying in the snow . . ." she faltered.

"A coat lying in the snow?"

"Yes, Missus, a red coat."

"A red coat—" Marian repeated, puzzled, and then awareness stole over her like an icy hand, choking off the incipient scream she felt rising in her throat. Only this morning Don and Bobby had left for a four-day camping trip, Bobby in his bright red nylon jacket.

Marian rose unsteadily to her feet. "You—you mean the wolf killed the boy—the person—who was in the red coat?" She felt herself virtually towering over the gypsy, who looked suddenly shrunken and frightened. "No, no, Missus, I do not say that. I see only the coat lying in the snow. I do not know how it comes to be there. See, now the crystal grows dark. It tells no more . . ."

"For five dollars *I just bet* it would tell more . . ." Fear and anger fought within her, making her words choppy.

"No, no, Missus. When it goes dark like that it can tell no more—not for *million* dollars, even."

Hot tears stung Marian's eyes. "You fraud, you're lying!" But the horror of it was that Marian could not believe her own accusation. There was a genuineness about the gypsy's manner that frightened her.

Stumbling, Marian turned and

ran from the shop and across the snow-churned street to the parked jeep.

There was no gainsaying the panic that leaped within her now. As she guided the bouncing jeep along the rutted road that led from the settlement to their cabin, her fingers felt cramped and cold on the steering wheel. It was no good to tell herself that she was a civilized woman who knew better than to believe in gypsies with their smudgy crystal balls. It was no good to tell herself that Don would laugh at her when she caught up to him. For that was what she must do. She must catch up to Don and Bobby.

Their first day's journey was to be a short one, she knew, as they expected to spend the night in that old abandoned trapper's cabin. She had been there several times herself. Although they had taken the dog sled she was sure, with snowshoes for the open stretches, she could make it well before nightfall. Her only frustration was in her imaginary conversation with Don. He would laugh at her, and quite probably would not turn back. But, no matter. She would be with them for the rest of the camping trip, to guard Bobby and see that he did not wander off or lag too far behind. She had never been convinced by Don's assurances that wolves, unprovoked, would not attack a human being, and the mental picture of Bobby, so young and vulnerable, ambushed by one of those grey monsters whose eerie howls she so often heard in the night, almost maddened her. If only she would be in time—if only nothing happened before she got to him . . .

Home at last, she sprang from the jeep and dashed into the cabin. There was no time to spare—she must grab the snowshoes and be off. As she snatched the shoes from the wall, her eyes fell on the light rifle hanging next to them. She hesitated. She hated to burden herself with a gun, for strangely enough she felt no fear for herself. It was the wearer of a red coat that destiny was stalking. Still, she knew Don would be angry when he found she had followed him through the woods unarmed. Quickly she lifted the rifle down and loaded it. One thing she *had* learned in Alaska—how to shoot a gun. A dubious accomplishment for when she returned to civilization, but it had made Don so happy to teach her. She slammed out of the cabin and started off, feeling the pulse in her throat beat an erratic tattoo of fear. She *must* be in time.

It would be difficult to say when she first became aware that she was

lost. But when the snow began taking on the strange pinkish glow of the dying sun, she could no longer deny that the large craggy rock she was approaching was the same one she had passed not more than an hour ago. She could no longer deny that she had started that frightening phenomenon of the lost-circling. Night was coming on and she was tired, so tired. She stumbled over to the big rock and leaned against it, her breath coming in painful sobs.

As she rested there, a kind of dreadful sanity came over her. It seemed almost incredible now that she could have allowed herself to go careening heedlessly into the woods like a mad woman, without compass, or matches, or gear of any kind. She had been so sure she knew the way. But now night was coming on, and she had no way to build a fire to ward off the cold that already was numbing her limbs. The sobering thought of a night in the wilderness without fire caused her to straighten up. She must lose no more time. The sun dying in the west would serve for a brief time, anyway, as an accurate compass. She was sure she had not traveled beyond the old trapper's cabin so it must still lie to the north. She would strike out in that direction and this time she would concentrate. Surely one could walk in a straight line from a given point if one concentrated.

She started out, a new surge of hope in her. But the going was difficult. The forest seemed to thicken. The trees grew ever more closely together and the underbrush tore at her clothes. It was only by sheer willpower that she kept the panic within her from engulfing her altogether.

The air was breathlessly still. A voice would carry far. Even if she could only get *near* the campsite, she could shoot the rifle and Don or Bobby might hear her. When she reached a clearer place she would stop and shoot. But at that moment her foot caught in a tangle of underbrush. She stumbled and fell heavily to the ground.

"Oh, dear God, no," whispered Marian, groping with frozen fingers for the rifle that had fallen a few inches away. "Oh, no, no." A sudden sound behind her stayed her finger on the trigger. She turned her head. There was no time, really, no time at all to aim the rifle at the large grey she-wolf that lunged, snarling, at her, the dying sun glinting pink against the evil fangs.

The morning sun rose coldly, its icy rays touching lightly the object in the snow. It was a jacket. And it was red. Red—with blood.

The feminine soul has been described as, ".....passive and abounding in intuitions without method and passions without justice." What more need be said?

The INTERROGATION

By Talmage Powell

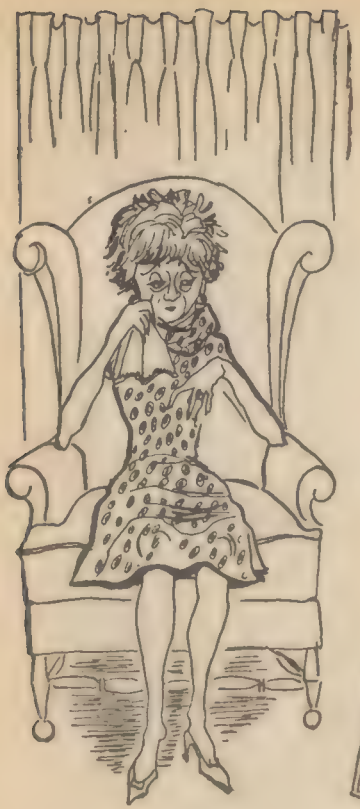
LIKE a broken spider, the body of Oliver Jones lay at the bottom of the stairway connecting the second floor and the comfortable livingroom of the Jones house.

Emily looked at the awkwardly sprawled remains of her husband and slumped against the plainclothes policeman who had brought her home.

Lieutenant Bill Spivey supported Emily with an arm about her bony shoulders. He steered her the short distance to a livingroom chair and lowered her into it.

Under the wispy, dyed-brown nest of straw, Emily's face was whiter than the generous powder that tried to hide the small, encroaching wrinkles.

Spivey murmured to a nearby policeman, "Check her medicine cabinet for smelling salts or spirits of



ammonia. Anything she can whiff."

Emily took a long, shuddering breath. "Never mind," she said in a brave little voice, "I'll manage. Even though you had prepared me on the way home, it was such a shock, actually seeing him . . ."

"I'm sorry we had to bring you from your garden club meeting under these circumstances, Mrs. Jones."

"You have your duty. It must be done. The garden club can wait."

"Yes. Well, if you're sure you're okay, please tell us if the man over there is your husband."

"Yes, that's Oliver."

Near Oliver, a tall man with a camera was taking pictures. An

older man with an open medical kit beside him was kneeling at the body. The actions were purely routine, Emily supposed. Anyone could see that Oliver's neck was broken from a fall from the top of the stairs.

With the polished coolness of the modern police specialist, Spivey gave Emily a few moments longer in which to compose herself. Then he suggested quietly, "There are

certain procedures we are required to follow."

"I understand. I'll help in any way I can."

From the corners of her eyes, Emily watched the coroner snap his medical kit closed and get to his feet. He nodded to two young men in white coats who had just entered the room. The two young men unfolded a stretcher, placed Oliver on it, and carried him out. To Emily, a breath of relief seemed to pass through the house.

She realized that the detective had said something to her. "Forgive me," she murmured. "I didn't quite catch that."

"I asked if Mr. Jones was here when you left the house this evening," Spivey said.

"No. I was here alone." Emily knuckled a tear from her eye. "Tilly Jenkins and Miranda Stone came by for me. We have a sort of car pool, you see, and take turns picking each other up. It was Tilly's night to drive."

"Did Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Stone come into the house?"

"Oh, yes. I wasn't quite ready when they arrived. They came in and helped themselves to a spot of coffee while I finished dressing."

"The three of you drove directly to the Hotel Carruthers?"

"Yes, the three of us. There was nobody else Tilly was supposed to pick up so we went directly there."

"Your club had a dinner meeting tonight, I believe," Spivey said.

"That's correct. Our quarterly report meeting. We try to make it a little bit special. We'd reserved a small dining room at the hotel."

"And you were there from the time of your arrival until we came with our unpleasant news?"

"I didn't leave the dining room," Emily said. "I sat between Tilly and Miranda all during dinner and the meeting afterward." She looked at Spivey slowly. "Are you asking me for an alibi, Captain?"

"Lieutenant," Spivey emended. "Always in cases of death by violence we have to suspect foul play."

"Even in Oliver's case?" Emily's tone expressed amazement. "Why, what happened to him is obvious. He came home, got dressed, started out, and fell down the stairs."

"Do you know where he was going, Mrs. Jones?"

"He—he didn't tell me."

Spivey drew an occasional chair close to Emily and sat down. "Please relax and trust me, Mrs. Jones. Anything you say to me will be said in confidence."

"But is it important where Oliver was going?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Then why blacken his name," Emily sobbed, "with his remains

barely cold? It's too heartless."

"Where was your husband going, Mrs. Jones?"

"I merely suspect, Lieutenant," Emily writhed slightly in her chair. "I don't really *know*."

"Then tell me what you suspect. Was he meeting someone?"

"I . . . Yes. I suppose so."

"Who?'

"George Carson."

"Your next door neighbor?"

"Yes," Emily said. "George and Sarah Carson, they live next door . . . Lieutenant, could you send for Sarah? I do need a friend right now."

"A little later, Mrs. Jones. Mrs. Carson has already heard the news. She is quite upset."

"Poor Sarah," Emily sobbed.

Spivey leaned forward and patted Emily's shoulder. "Remember that I'm your friend, why don't you?"

"You're such a kind young man. I'll write the police commissioner a little note about you."

"You don't have to put yourself out, Mrs. Jones. Just tell me about Oliver. Was he going next door to meet George Carson?"

"I . . . I wouldn't think so. They usually met downtown," Emily's voice dropped to a shamed whisper, "at a hotel or a bar—with . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Jones?"

"With girls," Emily choked.

"Had this sort of thing been going on long?"

"I can't say about George Carson. With Oliver, I think it assumed major proportions about the time he lost the last of his hair and the doctor put bifocals on him."

"Did you talk over these activities with your husband?"

"I tried to. He denied them. He and George thought they were being clever. They made a pretense of bowling leagues and business meetings and activities at their lodge."

"How did you learn the truth?"

"Sarah and I . . . Any woman . . . Women have instincts, you know, that men lack."

"I'm sure they do, in some areas," Spivey agreed.

"The lingering effects in a man's clothes of strange perfume, a faint red smudge on a shirt collar, the unconscious changes in a man's little habits," Emily said brokenly. "These clues are just as real as any you find, Lieutenant."

"I'm sure they are."

"We followed them one evening recently, Sarah and I. We saw them meet some girls. Saw the girls with our own eyes, Lieutenant! Blatant young sex kittens, they were! Sensual creatures making willing fools out of two middle-aged men! Sarah and I had a long, hard cry when we got back home."

Emily pulled a lacy handkerchief from the bosom of her unattractive dress and resumed the long, hard cry. "I'm sorry," Emily said. "It's just that . . ."

"There, there, Mrs. Jones. You don't have to explain or apologize to me. George Carson found your husband's body and called us, but he mentioned none of what you've told me."

"I don't imagine that he would," Emily said. "Recently, we've made discreet inquiries, Sarah and I. There was one girl in particular," Emily said. "Her name is Bunny Malone. She . . ." Emily burst into a fresh upsurge of caterwauling. "She had George and Oliver literally vying for her."

Spivey stared at Emily, his eyes turning absolutely black. Without moving his head, he gave an order. "Go next door and bring George Carson over here."

The uniformed policeman snapped into action. A few minutes later the livingroom door admitted George, with the policeman close behind him.

Porcine and sweating, George stood with none of his usual extroverted back-slapping manner or wisecracking remarks. "Emily, I'm sorry. If there's anything . . ."

Emily turned her face partially away from George. "I don't believe I care to talk to you, George Carson, now nor any other time."

Spivey got out of the occasional chair with a pantherish motion. "Mr. Carson, I believe you said you came in here looking for Mr. Jones, found him dead at the bottom of the stairs, and called the police."

"That's right." George gulped. He began to glance about uncomfortably.

"Did you come from your house over here?" Spivey asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact . . ."

"From a bar perhaps?"

"Bar?" George said, fright glinting in the robust, bulging, normally-bullying eyes.

"I think you'd better detail your evening, Mr. Carson."

George made an effort to swallow. "So I was in a bar, and Ollie was late. I tried the phone but he didn't answer."

"Are you sure of that?" Spivey asked.

"Sure, I'm sure!"

"Go on," Spivey invited.

"I drove by to see what was keeping him, that's all," George said. "The front door was unlocked. The lights were on. I stepped inside and called his name."

"You didn't see his body?"

"Not at first."

"It was in plain view from the front doorway, Mr. Carson."

George's hands began to shake.

"I didn't see him right away, I tell you!"

"Is it possible he was upstairs when you saw him, Mr. Carson?"

"What is this . . . No, no . . . He was lying right there at the foot of the stairs."

"Where he had fallen," Spivey said.

"He didn't fly down," George attempted to muster some of his natural bravado.

"No, he didn't fly," Spivey said. "He fell. And the question remains."

"Question? Wh-what question?"

"Did he fall under his own power?"

"What else? Listen, you can't make a crack like that!"

"Why not, Mr. Carson?"

"Because he fell all by himself, that's why. Nobody pushed Ollie down those stairs, least of all me!"

"Did I say he was pushed?" Spivey questioned mildy.

"You implied . . ." George said. He strangled for a brief instant. "You cops . . . I know you, how you work. If I'd done anything to Ollie, would I have called you?"

"Certainly. There was the strong chance you'd been seen entering the house," Spivey said. "Calling us was the only way you had of appearing innocent."

George grabbed his collar with a fat forefinger and pulled it away from his neck. "I am innocent! What reason would I have for hurting my good old pal, Ollie?"

"One of the oldest reasons in the world," Spivey said. "This one's name is Bunny Malone."

"B-B-Bunny?" George stammered. His eyes had reached the extreme limitations of their sockets.

"Did you and Mr. Jones have many words about her before you gave him the shove that inadvertently sent him down the stairs?" Spivey asked coolly.

"I didn't, I tell you. I didn't!"

"I'm afraid we'll have to take you downtown until we make sure," Spivey said.

George's frightened eyes lost their last glimmer of sanity. He turned and ran from the house.

Emily reached her front door in time to see George starting his car. The car went away from the curbing with the tires screaming a protest. Spivey and the uniformed policeman jumped into a black car parked before Emily's house.

The street dead-ended in a shopping district a block away. Emily saw George's car reel and slither, and fail to make the turn at the intersection. She heard the terrible crash of glass and metal as George's car plowed into the front of a smart little dress shop. She saw the dreadful whoosh of flame

that suddenly enveloped the car and shop front. It seemed to her that she could smell flesh frying like . . .

Emily gracefully fainted.

Despite an event-filled morning, neither Emily nor Sarah were inclined to bother with food at lunch the next day. In Emily's kitchen, they had tea with their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sarah's long lantern jaw worked slowly on the food.

"Did you have any trouble?" Emily asked.

"Not a bit," Sarah said in her nasal voice. "I watched for him to come home. Saw the light go on in his bedroom. Gave him time to dress. Went over, called up to him that I was borrowing a blouse. Fiddled around with your things up there in your bedroom, until I heard him enter the upstairs hall. Met him at the top of the stairs. One push," Sarah shrugged. "That's all there was to it. I didn't even have to give him an extra crack on the head to make sure the job was done."

"My, but you were cool," Emily said admiringly.

"No cooler than you," Sarah said.

"Credit George for the unexpected break," Emily said, "when he got impatient to get his evening started and came to see what was keeping Oliver. I hope you don't mind my changing the plan and taking the opportunity to . . ."

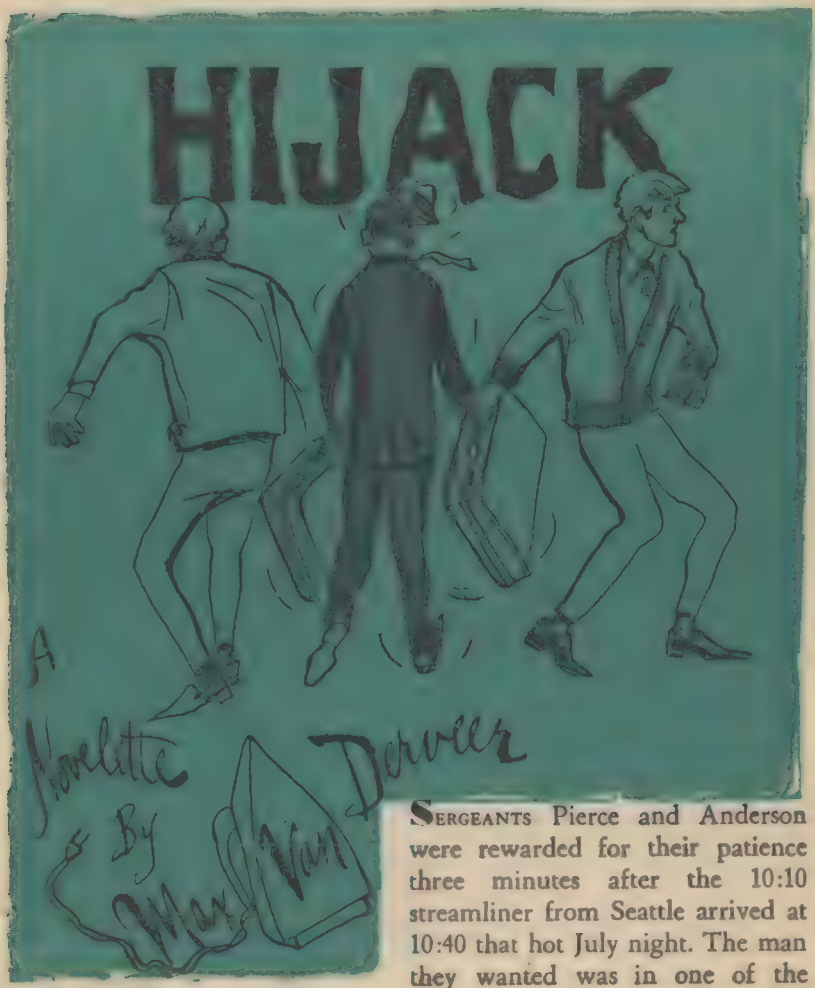
"Gracious, no!" Sarah reached across the table to pat her friend's hand. "It's much better this way. Now we don't have to wait several months and go to the trouble of fixing it so I would be completely in the clear when you took care of George for me."

Emily's eyes began to shine. "When we sell the houses and collect all that insurance, what will you do first, Sarah?"

"I've already decided." Sarah sipped her tea. "I'm going to Acapulco."

Emily looked out the window at the lovely blue sky. "I believe I'll go to Hawaii," she said with a delighted sigh, "and see if the things I've heard about it are really true."

Although admiring the trenchant perseverance of the upholders of the law, I am forced to concur with Lieutenant Pierce that the reflexiveness of domesticity never ceases to amaze.



SERGEANTS Pierce and Anderson were rewarded for their patience three minutes after the 10:10 streamliner from Seattle arrived at 10:40 that hot July night. The man they wanted was in one of the

crowds surging through the doors into the station from the debarkation platform. Pierce gauged the description while Anderson, the chain smoker, lit a fresh cigarette. The man was Caucasian, looked twenty-eight, was about five-ten, one hundred and sixty pounds, and moved with a slight limp, right leg. His disguise was amateurish, dyed red hair and dyed red brush mustache, both near a burnt orange color.

Pierce nodded to Anderson, and the two detectives from Central Police Headquarters edged through the mushrooming crowd expertly to flank the man. "Mr. Greene?" Pierce inquired in a firmly polite voice.

The man jerked and halted. His head pivoted between Pierce and Anderson. Pierce identified himself and the man paled immediately. Flesh pinched at the edges of eyes that became fear-coated.

"Your left forearm please, Mr. Greene," Pierce said.

The man remained frozen.

Anderson took the arm, pushed up the coat sleeve and opened the cuff button of the shirt. Pierce grunted with satisfaction when he saw the tattoo on the underside of the forearm, the naked girl entwined in a snake.

The man looked ready to bolt.

"Don't," Pierce said in an even voice. "Seattle police picked up Mrs. Flora at the air terminal before she boarded her plane. They are holding her now. She will not be waiting for you. She provided your description, Mr. Greene, and she has also admitted her part in the slaying of her husband, naming you the accomplice."

"I love her," Mr. Greene said in a voice that was a low whisper of defeat.

Pierce took his suitcase, and the two detectives escorted him toward the exit doors. Pierce was looking forward to fresh air. The air in the station was dead and pressing in. He felt wet and he wondered why some people found it necessary to hurry on such a hot night. The man ahead of them was hurrying. He was forty feet in front of them perhaps, a small man, neatly attired and carrying two new suitcases. He was moving toward the idle, uniformed policeman near the street doors with short, quick steps.

Pierce saw the two youths slide in on the man and knew immediate premonition.

One of the youths bumped the man on the right. The other hit him from the left. The youth on the left brought the edge of a stiff hand down hard against the back of the man's neck. The man cried out. Each youth grabbed a suit-

case. The man went down on his knees. His hat sailed from his head and rolled across the station floor as the youths bolted toward the street door. The startled uniformed policeman there stood flat-footed for a moment, then moved to block the escape route.

The sound of the gun shot was echoingly thunderous in the station. Somewhere a man chortled an oath of surprise, and a woman screamed as the uniformed policeman went up on his toes, his face caught in an expression of astonishment.

The youths burst past him. One of them hit his shoulder, and the policeman half turned and went down.

Pierce shoved Greene into Anderson. "Hold him, Andy!"

Pierce bolted from the station, but he was too late. A sports car carrying the two youths leaped from a stall in the parking area and bounced toward the avenue, then skidded into the glut of traffic and was gone.

Greene was in a cell, awaiting the arrival of Seattle police, and a cop had been slain.

The pall in the shopworn squad room at Central Police Headquarters that hot July night was a blanket. The quick death of one of them was not new. Collectively, they were subconsciously aware of Death's shadowed presence. It hung over them day and night, week in and week out, as an imagined halo hangs over an altar boy. It was a hazard of their occupation, yet none were prepared for the reality that came with Death's happening. None could quite accept, even with the reality, a new weight on their shoulders.

Sergeant Hugh Pierce, twenty-six, powerfully constructed, with dark good looks that made him a hellion with women, a member of the Detective Division ten months now, sat slumped at his desk. He had shed his suit coat and was in shirt sleeves, the sleeves rolled back from massive wrists. The fingers of his right hand were wrapped around a paper coffee cup, his constant companion, as he stared bleakly on the broad back of Sergeant Crocker.

Crocker, ill-dressed and lumpy, stood at an opened, smoke-filmed window, looking out on the night. His pudgy hands were locked behind him, and Pierce watched the fleshy fingers twitch reflexively. Crocker had been at the window almost five minutes now. He hadn't spoken since Pierce and Anderson had escorted the natty man who had been slugged at the train station into the squad room. Crocker had heard about the uni-

formed cop's death by the time they had arrived and was already in a black mood. No one, not even the boys on the night trick who now hung in the background, could blame him. At forty-seven, he was a veteran in police work. He knew many of the men in the service—beat patrolmen, car patrolmen, desk men, detectives—and he had viewed, but never had accepted, many deaths. Each was a blow to him even if he did not know the victim. But the killing this night had a personal touch. The dead cop was a veteran, too. Crocker had served with him, walked a companion beat in their early years on the force.

"Gentlemen, may I inquire why I am being detained?"

The natty man sat calm in a straight back chair near Pierce's desk. He had fitted a cigarette into a long, black holder, and now he held the holder almost delicately between two fingers of a manicured hand that rested on a carefully crossed knee.

Pierce lifted an eyebrow at Anderson. The chain smoker lit a fresh cigarette from the butt in his fingers and ground out the butt. Behind him, the night trick boys stood silent and grim-faced, some braced against the wall, some one-hipped on the corner of vacant desks. No one said a word. They just waited for Crocker to explode.

Crocker did not oblige. He turned his bulk slowly from the open window and fixed a gelid stare on the natty man. "You say your name is Nathan Moss?" His voice was flat.

"That's right."

"And you came in from Butte, Montana?"

"Again correct."

"You're a salesman?"

"I made my statement Sergeant."

"You sell maps to schools."

Nathan Moss drew on the cigarette holder, exhaled. "May I be released?"

"You're a cool customer, Moss. Let me remind you, a police officer has been killed."

Nathan Moss drew more smoke. "Yes. I saw the man die."

"So maybe you can tell me why those two punks wanted your suitcases?"

"Again I say, one contained clothing, one contained a supply of world maps I was prepared to present in an effort to sell your city schools. You draw the conclusions. This is my first journey to your city—and I hope my last."

"You'll have to stay in town a few days."

"Why?"

"I want you to identify the punks when we pick 'em up."

"Then apparently you are an op-

timist. How can you be so sure?"

"We've been known to apprehend a man or two."

Nathan Moss became coldly sarcastic. He looked Crocker straight in the eye. "Perhaps you should concentrate on a quarter of a million dollar armored car robbery?"

The detectives reacted simultaneously. Most stiffened and eyed the natty man with cold stares. Some shifted nervously and cast quick glances at each other. Crocker became a lump of rooted speculation. But before any of them could say a word, Nathan Moss continued, "I read newspapers in my spare time. An armored car robbery occurred in your city last week. A quarter of a million was stolen. That is a large enough amount to make a news story, even in Butte, Montana."

"Beat it, Moss," Crocker snapped.

"Thank you."

"But stay in town."

"Certainly."

All eyes in the squad room watched the natty man stand and snub out his cigarette carefully in an ashtray on Pierce's desk. He smiled at Pierce as he removed the butt from the holder, but the smile did not mean a thing. He dropped the butt into the tray. "Gentlemen," he said in departure, and then he was through the railing that separated the working area from the entry and was gone.

"Pierce," Crocker snapped. "I want to know where he goes."

Nathan Moss went straight to a downtown hotel. He left a cab and marched across the sidewalk and into the lobby of the hotel as if he were expected. Pierce watched him from a distance as he registered. Then Nathan Moss obtained a handful of change and stepped into a pay telephone booth. He was in the booth almost five minutes. Pierce wondered why he preferred the inconvenience of the pay phone over the telephone in his room. Was it because he did not want a record of the call?

Nathan Moss left the phone booth, crossed the lobby and disappeared into an elevator. Pierce waited until the door had closed on him, then he found the registration clerk polite and efficient. Moss had registered as a resident of 1023 Bowie Street, Butte, Montana. He had told the clerk he would be retaining his room several days, and then he had asked for change, enough to make a long distance call to San Francisco.

When Pierce returned to Central Police Headquarters, queries were sent to police departments in Butte and San Francisco.

Wednesday was another brilliant

and hot day, and Sergeant Gilbert Crocker was in a sour mood when Pierce arrived in the squad room. Pierce put the paper cup of coffee he had taken from the vending machine on his desk, shed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. Lieutenant Gifford, the blintz addict, arrived at 8:30. He was angry. The death of the uniformed patrolman had been senseless. He wanted the two youths apprehended fast. He also wanted action on the armored car robbery. There was only one hood in town big enough to pull the job. Everyone knew Courtney Klane had engineered the hijack and Klane had been interrogated thoroughly, but Klane was also free. Not one shred of evidence pointed a finger at him. Only speculation pointed the finger. There was no evidence. The cops were stuck high and dry on this one, so far.

"Pierce and Anderson take the slaying," Lieutenant Gifford decided. "Gil, the heist. Get me something. All of you."

Crocker grunted and Gifford turned on Pierce. "I want those kids in here, Sergeant. *Someone* has to know them. Hit every tipster in the city."

"They aren't pros. I'd stake my last dollar on that."

"Why?" Gifford asked bluntly.

Pierce shrugged. "They were twenty, twenty-one maybe, well dressed. Anyway, pros would have let Moss get out of the station, out where it was shadowed and there was less chance of being tripped up by a gutty bystander."

"One of them is a cop killer," Gifford said penetratingly.

"I'll find them, Lieutenant."

An answer to their Butte query arrived at 9:40. Butte police had no record of a Nathan Moss of that city. He was not listed in the telephone book, city directory, or with the driver's license division, and 1023 Bowie Street was a fictitious address. As fictitious as a map-making company. There were no map-making firms in Butte.

San Francisco police provided the link. Nathan Moss was an alias used by Nathaniel Logger, a Syndicate man who had been known to transport large sums of money from one section of the country to another. San Francisco's description of Nathaniel Logger fit Nathan Moss perfectly.

Crocker growled, "So now we know why two suitcases were so damned valuable."

"Moss . . . er, Logger was bringing in money?" Pierce frowned.

"Small, used bills to be exchanged for some of the armored car stuff. I'll bet on that, Sergeant. Two suitcases—I'd say that'd be

about $50,000, just as an estimate."

"But how would two kids know about a Syndicate operation?"

"*How* isn't important. The important things at the moment are Moss and the fence."

"Jerold Bishop?"

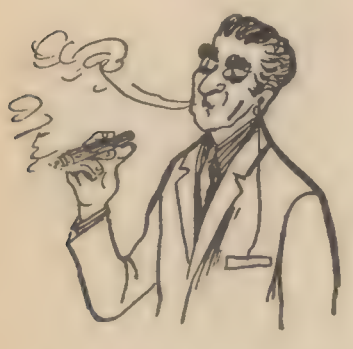
"Do you know a bigger fence in the city?"

"No."

"Let's bring 'em in."

But Nathan Moss had checked out of the downtown hotel and vanished.

Pierce and Crocker drove in silence into the newly-named Kennedy section of the city. Neither cherished returning to headquarters and Lieutenant Gifford's wrath when they would be forced to tell him of Moss' disappearance. Pierce braked the official sedan at the curbing in front of the book store in the quietly substantial neighborhood. The store occupied the ground floor of a huge, stone edifice. Jerold Bishop, fence and store proprietor, was a softly polite little man of thirty-five years with a thick mane of gray-black hair, bushy eyebrows, and a hearing aid. Bishop acted as though he didn't have a care in the world. He greeted the sergeants amiably.



"Get off the dime."

"Jerold."

"Hot."

"Very."

Bishop adjusted the hearing aid with his fingertips and led them back through the book shelves and air conditioned comfort to richly appointed bachelor quarters. He offered them brandy, which they refused, and put them in deep chairs. He sat opposite them, lit a large cigar and waited politely.

Crocker said, "We talked to a friend of yours last night, as you undoubtedly have heard. We'd like to talk to him again, but he has taken a flyer."

"Friend?" Jerold Bishop arched a bushy brow.

"Nathan Moss, or maybe you know him as Nathaniel Logger."

"Moss? Logger?" Bishop's face didn't change. "Never heard of him, Sergeant."

"Get off the dime."

Bishop shrugged. "Sorry."

"He was bringing in exchange money. You've heard of exchange

money, haven't you, Mr. Bishop?"

"I've never heard of Moss—or Logger."

Crocker stood up. His voice hardened. "Okay, Jerold, let's go downtown."

Bishop didn't move in his chair. "Why?"

"In our books, there's only one guy in town who can move a quarter of a million."

"I believe you gentlemen have talked to Mr. Klane about that."

"Right now, I'm talking to you, Jerold—*about* you."

"I've never seen a quarter of a million in my life, Sergeant."

"Damnit, creep, a police officer was killed!"

Bishop's face changed this time. He looked sad as he studied the growing ash on the light tip of the large cigar. "Yeah, I heard about that, Crocker. Tough."

"Out of the chair, creep."

"Maybe you should try College Boy."

Crocker glowered. Pierce inventoried Bishop carefully. College Boy. His name was Peter Ambler. He belonged to Courtney Klane.

"College Boy is in trouble," Bishop continued. "Deep trouble, I hear. There's a stable. You know, a guy with his looks has gotta have a stable. There's a doll named Billie. Another'n named Cynthia. Others. That kind of stable—and horses—all require green."

"How much green?" Crocker snapped.

Bishop shrugged and puffed on the cigar. "I hear about fifty thou."

"Where?"

"The Shark."

"The juice man?"

"Who else has dough these days, Sergeant? Not banks."

Crocker looked at Pierce. The young detective was thinking rapidly. It could figure. Klane could have pulled off the heist, Klane could have arranged the exchange. College Boy would be on the inside. He'd know who was coming in with the money. He'd know *when*. And he might be just fool enough to stage the hijack. It would be suicide when Klane caught up with him, but College Boy might be a big enough fool to . . .

"The punks, Bishop," Crocker was saying. "Who are the punks?"

Bishop shrugged. "Things happen in town, Sergeant, even I don't know about." He left his chair then, stood neat and at ease before Crocker. "Are we still going downtown?"

"We want them. Fast."

"I can't help you."

"If I find out you're lying to me, creep—"

"I'm not."

Crocker measured him for a

long time. "So it's College Boy, eh?"

"Try him, Sergeant."

"Like I say, creep, if I find out you're lying . . ."

He let the words dribble off as Jerold Bishop calmly turned off his hearing aid. He stared at Bishop, and then he turned and stomped out of the bachelor quarters. Pierce trailed after him. Pierce knew a tremendous urge to yank the hearing aid from Bishop's ear and stuff it down his throat.

In the heat of the sun again, Pierce asked, "So how do we find Peter Ambler, Sergeant?"

"Alive—I hope," Crocker said sourly.

"Then we'd better get to him before Klane does."

But that Wednesday was not a day designed for cops or search. It became a day of almost unbearable heat, greasy bodies, short tempers and futile search. The detectives did not find Peter Ambler, nor were they able to pigeonhole Courtney Klane when they finally turned their humanized radar beams on him. By late afternoon they felt as if a poniard had been stuck in their bodies, individually. Then the poniard was twisted. A pick-up order for Jerold Bishop was sent out. But Bishop had disappeared, too.

Crocker swore harshly, and the night trick boys who had come on duty at 6 p.m. wisely remained in the background. Only Pierce and Anderson met Crocker's wrath head-on. And Pierce felt like swearing back at him.

"We should have brought him in this morning," he said flatly.

"Yeah," Crocker growled. "We could've saved his shyster a trip, too. Right, Sergeant? We could've swung around and picked *him* up on the way downtown."

Anderson lit a fresh cigarette, snapped the used match to the scarred floor. "Maybe we're going at this thing wrong, Gil. Maybe we should be concentrating on the two punks."

"Concentratin' on em!" Crocker exploded. "Hell, we don't even know 'em!"

Pierce went out into the hall and got a new cup of coffee from the vending machine. He was tired, dog-tired, and he felt soiled. He suddenly wanted a bath and the soothing equanimity of his wife, Nancy. The equanimity was a quality about her he treasured. Nancy knew his moods, his frustrations. More important, she knew the salve.

He looked up at the ancient wall clock as he returned to his desk. Ten minutes before nine o'clock. Nancy could be ironing, reading, or merely waiting. He decided he needed her this very minute. He

said, "How 'bout calling it a day, Sergeant?"

Crocker ignored him and answered the jangled demand of the telephone on his desk. He grunted, listened. His scowl deepened. And Pierce watched him with a queasy felling of impending doom. Pierce could not hear the words being rattled into Crocker's ear, but he knew the message was not good.

Crocker slammed the phone together and sat swearing as he fixed Pierce and Anderson from eyes that gleamed with determination. "Another'n," he said in a viciously soft voice. Another cop has been killed."

Silence hung in the squad room.

"Patrol car," Crocker continued, the words coming as if they were being churned out by a machine. "One dead, one wounded. Two kids in a sports car. Drunk. Our boys attempted to stop them."

It was a long time before Pierce ventured: "Two kids in a sports car?"

Wednesday night became a long and horrendous night for Pierce. Not even Nancy's placations could reach him. He smoked cigarettes, drank coffee, paced, pondered, damned, vowed, tossed in their bed, wanted to shout at the muscle spasms in his legs. And Thursday came too soon, dawned too hot. He got up with a dull throb between his eyes. Coffee had a dishwater taste. Cigarette smoke burned his lungs. Crocker was a sore boil.

A ballistics report received at 10:20 in the morning only heaped misery on misery. Bullets from the same gun had killed the beat patrolman in the train station and the car patrolman who had attempted to halt a pair of drunks.

Then Peter Ambler was found. Bruised, wire-bound and dead, Peter Ambler was fished from the river.

College Boy had been graduated. The only trouble was, he was not wearing the traditional cap and gown in the photographs used by the afternoon newspapers.

Lieutenant Gifford had slid beyond the edge of caution when he addressed Pierce, Crocker and Anderson in the squad room. His thoughts were no longer with shysters, adverse publicity for the department, or the ire of his superiors if he was wrong. His face was a mask. His words were terse. "Bring in Courtney Klane. I don't care if you find him in Anchorage —bring him in."

The three detectives stood quiet.

A girl fractured the silence. "Is this . . . this the Detective Division?" she asked in a voice that was a combination of uncertainty

and desperation, almost whispered.

She was tall and lithe, with gold-blonde hair framing an Hellenic face, a girl on the brink of full-blown womanhood who looked nineteen but probably was twenty-five. She wore a fresh white blouse and a fitted gabardine skirt, and she stood at the railing that divided the room, long fingers of one hand twitching against the top edge of the gate, dark eyes dancing pleadingly.

Pierce knew an instinctive liking for the girl, and a deep-seated desire to set her at ease, give her peace of mind. Some of both stemmed from a taunt. She was vaguely familiar; far back in his catalogued memory, she was an image. He attempted an appearance of nonchalance and an easy grin.

"Can we help you, Miss . . ." He let it hang purposely.

"Weatherly," the girl said quickly. She came through the gate. The dark eyes became rooted on him. "Lucy Weatherly."

"This is the Detective Division, Miss Weatherly," he said, nodding. "I am Sergeant Pierce." He forced the grin to remain alive over disturbing curiosity. He had her with the name.

"I came here to . . ." She hesitated. The dark eyes danced away in a moment of indecision, flashed back and held with fresh determination. "A desk sergeant downstairs said you might be able to help me."

"Yes?" Pierce said patiently.

"It's about . . . Peter Ambler." Perfect white teeth caught her lower lip briefly, but the eyes remained steady. "At least the afternoon newspapers said Peter Ambler was his name. I knew him as Danny Sloan."

Pierce was unable to stem the sudden tenseness of his muscles, but he managed to resist the magnetic impulse to flash looks at Gifford, Crocker and Anderson.

"What about Peter Ambler, Miss Weatherly?"

"Well . . . I just don't understand."

Pierce waited.

"I mean—Danny Sloan, Peter Ambler, College Boy—what the newspapers say he is . . . was . . ." She caught the lower lip again. "Please . . . I'm confused."

"He was Peter Ambler and he was everything the newspapers said," Pierce said, wishing he was on the sidelines and listening to Gifford or Anderson or any other detective.

The hurt appeared in her eyes, but it did not push out acceptance.

"How did you know Peter—er, Danny Sloan, Miss Weatherly?"

She met his look and he knew an even greater liking for her. "We dated."

"Isn't your father Arnold Weatherly?"

"Yes."

"Was he acquainted with Ambler—Sloan?"

"No. Father and Danny never met."

"By design?"

"I—don't understand."

"Perhaps you didn't want them to meet, Miss Weatherly."

Her eyes changed suddenly. Pierce didn't like what he found there now. "It wasn't that at all, Sergeant," she said, clipping the words slightly. "Danny Sloan was not like the man described in the newspapers this afternoon. The only reason he and father did not meet was, my father is quite busy these days. He seldom is home for very long periods of time."

"I believe he is about to announce that he will be a candidate for the U. S. Senate."

"He is."

"Would he have approved of Danny Sloan?"

"He would have."

"Peter Ambler?"

"I—" She stopped. Her nostrils flared slightly. "No. Father would not have approved of Peter Ambler." Her words were suddenly soft.

"I'm sorry things worked out this way for you, Miss Weatherly."

"Thank you."

She turned. Pierce remained silent.

"Just a minute, Pierce."

Lieutenant Gifford's voice was hard and the muscles in his face were set when Pierce looked at him. "Perhaps there are some things Miss Weatherly can tell us about Ambler," he said. His eyes rooted on her. "Understand, Miss Weatherly, two of our officers have been killed and we have reason to think Ambler knew about those murdered."

"Yes," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Pierce boiled inside as he stared

at Gifford. The girl had reached him. No one in his right mind could possibly conceive that she would have any knowledge of Peter Ambler's—Danny Sloan's, or whatever you wanted to call him—true self. No one could even *think* she might know anything about murder or gangland slayings or armed robbery. Yet here was Gifford bulldozing into her as if she had been taken from a lineup of street girls.

Pierce swelled but managed to hold himself.

After all, the Lieutenant was being a police officer. He was investigating murder. Three murders.

They used the privacy of Gifford's office for the interrogation. His questions were polite but pointed, the questions of an expert at work. But, surprisingly, Lucy Weatherly was an expert, too. She refuted, fended and defended beautifully. And Pierce found himself gradually slipping into the role of an entertained spectator as he remained in the background and allowed his initial irritation to fade before the tide of admiration for the foes. He was witnessing a classic in query and answer, a running conflict of clever mind against clever mind. And it was dusk before the foes backed off and surveyed their opponents anew. Each had earned the respect of the other, and each saw the futility of continuance.

Gifford said, "I think that will be all, Miss Weatherly."

"Please do not *think*, Lieutenant," she said calmly. "I do not wish to return."

"That will be all, Miss Weatherly."

"Thank you."

She stood, smoothed the gabardine skirt across her hips, and left the office as if she were leaving a beauty salon.

Pierce went after her, expecting a sharp summons from Gifford. None came. "Miss Weatherly?"

"Yes?" She stood at the railing, half-turned.

"Do you have transportation?"

"I came in a cab."

He grinned. "Then I'll give you a lift."

"It isn't necessary, Sergeant."

Pierce opened the railing gate for her.

"More questions?" she asked.

"No questions," he grinned.

She rode beside him in the front seat of his dented sedan as if it was natural for her to be there. Their conversation was idle and exploratory, and Pierce was conscious of her oblique inventory as he piloted the sedan expertly through the city traffic and into a residential district. The Weatherly home was a massive stone struc-

ture in the dusk of evening, set far back from a quiet street on a sculptured lawn. Pierce braked on the curving concrete drive behind a topdown sport convertible, and Lucy Weatherly left the sedan with an economy of movement.

She leaned in the open door. "Thank you, Sergeant," she said with a genuine smile.

He sat stonefaced, suddenly gripping the steering wheel hard, as a blonde boy who looked twenty came out of the stone house and ran down the front steps. The boy was neat in dark sports coat and slacks and white bucks. He danced between the front of the sedan and the back of the sports car with a lifted arm.

"Sis," he said in greeting.

And then he was inside the convertible and the motor came to life.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" Lucy Weatherly's face was pleated with a frown.

"Your brother?" Pierce asked, bobbing his head toward the car that was moving away now.

"Bernie? Yes."

"Good evening, Miss Weatherly."

She straightened slowly, shut the door of the sedan, and Pierce knew she was deeply troubled, but he did not have time for explanations now. Anyway, she wouldn't like the explanations if he gave them.

He drove after the sports car. He wasn't sure that he actually had recognized the car. But he was sure about the youth. Bernard Weatherly had been one of the youths who had grabbed a suitcase from Nathan Moss in the train depot.

The car was not difficult to follow, but Pierce was cautious. He was positive about Bernard Weatherly and the train station, yet the connection was difficult to accept. His mind churned. Bernard Weatherly was from a family of wealth and stature. Why would he hijack a man? Why would he steal? Why would he kill?

Had Bernard Weatherly killed?

Pierce was forced to admit he did not know which one of the two youths had fired the fatal shot.

His thoughts leaped to the now dead Peter Ambler. Bernard Weatherly's association with College Boy was easy—Lucy. Which, in turn, almost had to mean Bernard had discovered *who* Peter Ambler really had been, and *what* he had been. And this meant Bernard had hoodwinked his sister and probably the rest of his family, if Lucy Weatherly had told the truth during the squad-room interrogation.

Pierce shook his head. He didn't like the thoughts, the possibility

that Lucy Weatherly may have lied to them.

Taillights on the convertible flashed. Pierce slowed the sedan and watched it turn through an iron gate. He braked at a curbing. He had a clear view over a thick hedge of a driveway and a sprawling redwood house. He watched Bernard Weatherly swing the car through a U turn in a large, vacant carport and stop. Another youth, also neatly attired, popped out of the house and jumped into the front seat of the small car beside Weatherly. The car shot down the drive, hit the street and turned away from Pierce.

He followed it across the city. If Weatherly and his companion knew they were being tailed, they were not concerned. They slowed, turned from the street into a parking lot beside a cocktail lounge. Pierce eased his sedan into a slot at the curbing and sat watching the youths leave the lot to enter the lounge. He looked around. It was dark now, a hot night. He recognized the area of the city. It was on the edge of the warehouse district.

He went into the carpeted dimness of the neat lounge. Business was slow and he saw his quarry immediately. They were in swivel chair-stools at the bar. He knew he should call into the squad room. On the other hand, he had not had a good look at Bernard Weatherly's companion yet. And what if he were wrong about Bernard?

He sat alone at a table near the street door and ordered a bourbon and water. He did not touch the drink as he inventoried the youths. Bernard's companion was the right build, the same as the second youth at the train depot.

Pierce beckoned his waiter again. "Those two at the bar," he said. "Do you know them?"

"Mr. Weatherly and Mr. Poswold," the waiter said crisply.

"How often do they come in here?"

"Nightly."

"Tuesday night?"

The waiter hesitated. "No, now that you ask, they were not in last night."

"I know the Weatherly boy. What about the other one? Poswold?"

The waiter was frowning now. "I don't believe, sir, that I should say—"

Pierce identified himself and the waiter decided to become neutral. "Mr. Randy Poswold, sir. His father is Judge Poswold, I believe."

"Thanks."

Pierce waved the waiter away and sat for a long time wrestling with his thoughts. Judge Poswold,

huh? He knew the jurist by reputation.

He kept an eye on the waiter and noted with satisfaction the man remained away from other employees and from the youths at the bar. It was a good move on the waiter's part. Communication with others would have called for immediate action from Pierce, and he was not yet ready to move in. He still had not had a good look at the Poswold youth.

Well, there was only one way to get that look.

He left his untouched drink and went to the bar. He knew an immediate need for wariness as he met the direct looks of Bernard Weatherly and Randy Poswold. He wanted both.

"Hey . . ." Bernard Weatherly let it fade as he stiffened and stared hard at Pierce.

The detective knew the youth was struggling for recognition, was unsure. He attempted to keep him off-balance. "Sergeant Pierce. Central Police Headquarters." He moved his hand. He was in position to take out his gun quickly. And watching the eyes of the youths, some of the tension left him. Both had noted the move, both knew what it meant.

"My sister," Bernard Weatherly breathed. "He was with my sister . . ." He let it trail off.

Randy Poswold was stone. His expression was black, his eyes glittering with hardness, but he did not move. He said, "What do you want with us, copper?" He spoke almost without moving his lips.

Pierce bobbed his head toward the street door.

Neither youth moved.

Pierce stepped back, waited, ready for anything. Poswold turned on the swivel seat of the chair-stool, stood. Bernard Weatherly followed quickly. They walked side by side toward the street door. Pierce trailed them, his confidence swelling with each step. He'd cuff them outside, before they got into his sedan. He didn't want to stir the other customers in the lounge.

Suddenly Poswold hunched, whirled and shot a fist straight into Pierce. The fist drove him back with a gasp of breath. Blows pounded his body. He heard oaths. He struggled to get his hand to his gun. And then a fist came up under his jaw and snapped back his head. He knew he was reeling. He heard his own hoarse shout. His heels caught something. He sat down jarringly.

The room swirled, cleared quickly. He shook his head. The youths were not in sight. Hands caught his armpits. He struggled up, shrugged off the hands and

lunged toward the door unsteadily. He hit the sidewalk. The sports car bounced out of the parking lot. Street traffic swerved and squealed. The car roared through a sharp turn in front of a careening police patrol car. And then the sound of a shot filled the night. Pierce heard the whine of the bullet, went down on the sidewalk and rolled. The wail of a siren started low, took on stature. And Pierce was on his feet again and racing to his sedan.

He drove through the spread traffic expertly, using the path cleared by the siren and flashing red light of the patrol car ahead of him. He heard what sounded like gun shots. The sounds came again. He saw the police car weave and shoot at an angle into the opposite lane of traffic to smash head-on into a parked car. He saw the back of the police car lift off the street and start to come around, then he was past the wreck and his eyes were glued on the taillights of a weaving convertible. It had slowed, seemed out of control.

When the body spilled from the driver's side onto the street, he knew why.

It required all of his skill to miss the body. He used his brakes to start into a side skid. He cut the steering wheel at the final second. The back end of the sedan whipped back and he was skidding in the opposite direction, but he had managed to slide around the prostrate form. He eased off the accelerator, allowed the sedan to right itself, and then he shot after the sports car that now was widening the distance between them rapidly.

They roared into the warehouse district. Good. They had lost the benefit of a siren or red light to warn traffic now. They had weaved in and out crazily. But in the warehouse district, the traffic thinned abruptly and Pierce was able to concentrate on closing the distance between the two vehicles.

Suddenly he saw the convertible go into a turn and he shouted an involuntary warning. He knew the car would never navigate the intersection corner at its speed. He saw the small car swing wide, hit the curbing, bounce, go up on the sidewalk and then into the skid.

And then he was past the intersection and sliding to a stop. He hadn't even tried to make the same turn. It would have been suicide.

Rolling from the sedan, he stumbled, righted himself, drew his gun and raced back to the corner of the building. The sports car was folded around a street lamp pole, the pole seemingly protruding from the driver's seat, but instead of the driver being limp inside the car,

DRUGS

Pierce saw him pounding down the middle of the street, racing into the heavy shadows of the squat warehouses.

He shouted and ran after the fleeing figure. He did not know who he was chasing, Bernard Weatherly or Randy Poswold, but he knew now that he had a chance. In the auto chase he had been at a distinct disadvantage. The small car was faster than his sedan, maneuverable. In the hands of an expert, it could have lost him easily by using corner turns. But the driver had not been an expert, had not seized his advantage. And now the odds had narrowed considerably.

Pierce saw the youth turn a corner and disappear. He slowed, slammed into a brick wall. He had no desire to burst around that same corner and into a barrage of bullets. With his gun gripped in his right hand, he gasped for breath and eased his head out from the building. The street and sidewalks ahead were dark with shadows and vacant.

He stepped out from the protection of the building, stood silent. Nothing stirred in the shadows. He moved forward cautiously. His slow steps sounded unusually loud in the still, hot night. Sweat poured from his pores. He felt on fire. He stopped in stride when he saw the light. It came from a door that was wide and open, a vehicle door in one of the warehouses. Was the youth inside the warehouse? Pierce knew he would be exposed to almost any kind of attack when he stepped into the patch of light. He stood at its edge, breathing heavily, listening intently, but there were only the normal night sounds of the city.

He drew in a deep breath, held it, and stepped quickly into the warehouse, gun poised, ready for anything.

The warehouse seemed empty of humanity. That was odd. Had someone carelessly departed without locking up? Or would he find men working in the far reaches of the large structure?

His eyes moved constantly. To his right and left were solid, stacked wooden crates. Straight ahead was a wide gap, wide enough to accommodate large trucks easily. There were no vehicles in the building. He listened again for men at work. Nothing. He moved slowly into the building.

The hiss of indrawn breath was his warning.

Pierce hunched, whirled and took the blow on his shoulder. His gun flipped from his fingers and clattered against the concrete floor. He clutched futilely at the youth's

shirt front as his knees came unhinged. The youth was armed. He brought the gun down on Pierce's left wrist. Pierce sprawled on his hands and knees, knowing that Randy Poswold had come out from a hidden aisle behind the stacked crates.

All he could see now was the polished toes of Poswold's shoes as Poswold let him hang there for a long time. Pierce blinked hard against the pain in his shoulder and wrist. His left arm was numbed. Scrambled thoughts whirled through his head. He remembered the body sprawled in the street. It had to be Bernard Weatherly. Was Weatherly dead? He remembered the hard glitter of Randy Poswold's eyes when he had approached the two youths in the cocktail lounge. Now he saw that glitter as Death. And he remembered Sergeant Crockers' time-worn warning, "Never take a punk alone, Sergeant!"

Randy Poswold shuffled his feet. "Up."

The command jerked at Pierce. He forced his head up slowly. Poswold stood about four feet away, ugly and taut with youthful ferocity.

Wasn't there anyone else in the warehouse? Why didn't they show?

"Up," Poswold repeated loudly.

"Take it easy, Randy."

Poswold grinned and stepped forward as Pierce pushed back on his knees. Pierce saw the gun flash but he was unable to pull his face out of the way. The gun slashed against his mouth and the yell of protest was jammed back in his throat. He spilled back and then on his side. He could taste the blood through the blinding pain and he knew that one of his lips, perhaps both, had been split against his teeth.

"How do you like it, copper?"

The words came from far away. Pierce shook his head, attempted to get the youth in focus.

"You coppers shouldn't have killed Bernie."

Pierce pushed up into a sitting position. Everything whirled. He moved his legs under his body, remained still. His head was clearing slowly. Pain was taking over. His mouth felt swollen all out of proportion. He couldn't feel his teeth with his tongue. Maybe those teeth were gone. But he didn't remember spitting them.

"You shouldn't have killed Bernie!" Poswold repeated with animal shrillness.

Pierce got him in focus. He pushed up on his knees, planted a foot and stood slowly. He bobbed, but he could feel the strength flowing back into his muscles.

Poswold held the gun steady in his right hand. His mouth was wire-tight, his eyes narrowed and gleaming. Pierce saw his own gun on the concrete floor. It was ten feet away.

Suddenly Poswold's lips thinned in a grin that wasn't a grin at all. His eyes flicked to Pierce's gun, came back. "You're in a jam, huh, copper?"

"Are you going to kill me, Randy?"

"You damn right I'm going to kill you!"

"Just like you killed the others."

"Just like you coppers killed Bernie."

"You've already killed two police officers and College Boy. You've already—"

"Not Ambler!" Poswold was actually grinning now.

"You and Bernie and College Boy. The three of you. College Boy knew the money was coming into town with Nathan Moss. He set up you and Bernie. He had to cut you two in. Nathan Moss would recognize College Boy but not you two. He—"

Poswold opened his gun, looked in the chamber, snapped the gun together again, laughed deep in his throat. "One slug, copper. This is gonna be fun." He leveled the gun on Pierce. "A little Russian roulette, huh?"

It hit Pierce hard. He'd been stalling, attempting to gain an advantage.

He saw the gun quiver and he knew Poswold was squeezing the trigger.

The snap of the firing pin striking the empty chamber was loud in the stillness of the warehouse.

Pierce jerked reflexively.

Poswold laughed.

The gun quivered again.

And Pierce leaped. He shot a large fist into the megalomaniac's face. The fist hit home with the second empty click of the gun and Poswold went back with a howl. Pierce followed with a looping uppercut that struck Poswold's wrist and brought his arm up. The gun left his fingers and sailed back over his shoulder. Pierce drove a right jab into the youth's stomach and sent him down to the concrete with a looping left. He was over the groveling body quickly and wrenching Poswold's wrists back to his spine. He whipped on the handcuffs and then he stood erect and spread-legged over the youth, taking in air with huge gulps.

He found a man in a sweat-stained shirt and pants and checkered cap gaping at him round-eyed from fifty feet away.

The man was frightened and cooperative. The warehouse door

had been open because he had been expecting a delivery truck in to load. He had been working at the back of the building, had heard voices, had thought the expected truck had arrived, but had come up front to find Pierce smashing Poswold into the concrete.

Randy Poswold was sullen and silent. He refused to say more than to give his name and address and demand permission to telephone a lawyer. Sergeant Crocker suggested calling his father. The youth told Crocker to, "go to hell."

Poswold was hustled downstairs and into a cell to cool, the warehouse man was dismissed, and the newspaper boys were given their story.

Crocker fixed Pierce with a steady look. "How're you feelin'?"

"Like hell."

"You look like hell. How many times have I told you never to take a punk alone?"

"I figured I could handle him."

"Sure."

Even the night trick boys flinched under the sarcasm.

Pierce asked, "The Weatherlys know about their son?"

"Yeah."

"How 'bout our boys?"

"One wounded, the other smashed up in the wreck, but both will make it, Doc says. Speaking of docs, you'd better see one."

"My wife will take care of me."

"Yeah," Crocker grunted, and Pierce walked out of the squad room.

He found the night still hot, but he felt better inside. A job had been completed. He touched his swollen mouth with his fingertips, tasted new blood on the split in his upper lip. His shoulder was sore and his wrist ached. He drove slowly across town to the modest apartment. He was thinking about Lucy Weatherly and the shock of her brother's death to her and the family. The man seated in the front room of his apartment caught him unprepared. The man held a gun on Nancy.

Pierce became rooted two steps inside the open door.

"Close it," Jerold Bishop said without looking at him.

Pierce kicked the door shut. "What's with you, creep?"

"He's been here almost thirty minutes," Nancy said. "What happened to your mouth?"

She was calm, but slightly wide-eyed as she stared at him. She sat on a large footstool near an ironing board. She was in shorts. The lone signs of tension were in the way she pressed her knees together and clenched her fist on her thighs. Across the room the tele-

vision set was turned off now, probably at Bishop's demand, but Pierce knew that earlier his wife had been ironing in the front room so that she might also watch the video shows.

"I got the flash on the radio," Bishop said.

Pierce attempted to hide his ignorance. "Yeah?"

Bishop shrugged without taking his eyes or gun from Nancy. "So I gotta have a way out of town. Figures?"

"Maybe."

Bishop's laugh was a grunt. "No cat and mouse, Sergeant, please. The Weatherly kid is dead, and you've got Randy Poswold in the clink. I know the punk. I've been dealing with him for a couple of years now, although, thinking back, I don't know why. The kid always was potential trouble. But he came in with some good stuff to move. His stuff always had class. I don't know where he got it. I never asked. It brought a good price, so I handled it. That was a mistake. I can see it now."

Some of the jumbled thoughts began to straighten out in Pierce's mind, but he stalled. "You fenced for him, eh, creep?"

"I never should have. He always smelled of trouble."

"And then Courtney Klane hit the armored car and came to you to set up the money exchange."

"Fifty thousand is big dough, Sergeant."

"You needed a couple of guys to hit Nathan Moss, somebody Moss wouldn't recognize. That'd be Poswold and Weatherly."

"Randy brought in Weatherly. I never saw the kid in my life until this setup."

"Let's see—their cut would be about five thousand."

"Ten. They came high, but I couldn't quibble. It had to be quick."

"College Boy?"

Bishop flicked Pierce a glance, grinned. "A sucker. You and Crocker were pressing so I give him to you to keep you off my back."

"And then killed him so he couldn't talk."

"College Boy always did have a big mouth when there was a squeeze."

"But tonight we got Randy Poswold."

"Yeah. Let's quit stalling, Sergeant. I know punks. They bleat. You know all of this, so let's quit stalling. I gotta get out of town. Klane ain't gonna like me now. Nor you guys. That's where you and your doll come in. You're gonna take me. I figure that by this time you boys have got the exits plugged, waiting for me to make

my move. Well, I'm making it—but with you and the doll. You two are gonna drive me out, nice and quiet-like. Get it?"

"Yeah."

Bishop got out of the chair suddenly, fingered his hearing aid. "So let's roll."

The reflexiveness of domesticity never ceased to amaze Pierce, and all he could do was shake his head when his wife stood and said, "You'll excuse me a moment, Mr. Bishop?"

She wet the tip of a forefinger and touched the bottom of the iron upended on the board. The iron sizzled. She gave Bishop a tiny smile. "See, the place could burn down while we are gone."

"Yeah," he grunted. He swung his gun on Pierce, kept it there.

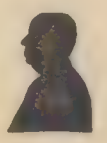
Pierce saw his wife lean over the board and pull the cord from the wall plug. When she turned from the board, Bishop was profile to her. The movement was smooth. She swept up the hot iron as she took the step to join her husband. She brought the iron up and around fast. Bishop flinched, but she managed to slap the iron against his cheek. He howled. His gun boomed.

And then Pierce was on him, driving a fist deep into his stomach and catching the gun wrist. Pierce whirled, brought up his knee and smashed Bishop's wrist down across his thigh. The gun flipped from his fingers. Bishop stiffened with another howl and when Pierce looked, he found Nancy pressing the flat of the iron against Bishop's spine.

Pierce spun Bishop across the room and followed with his fist. Bishop went down on the carpeting and Pierce was on him fast, cuffing him.

It was a long time before he looked up at Nancy. She stood slightly spread legged, the iron still clutched in her hand. She was half turned, staring at the new bullet hole in their plastered wall. She faced him. He shook his head in amazement. "You're dangerous with that thing, love."

She hefted the iron, held it aloft. And then a grin spread over her face. "Remember that, darling."



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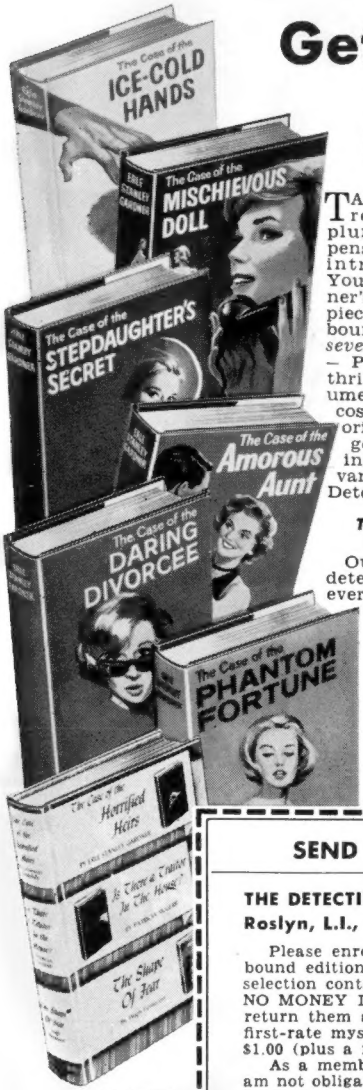

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